

ELIZABETH WEIN

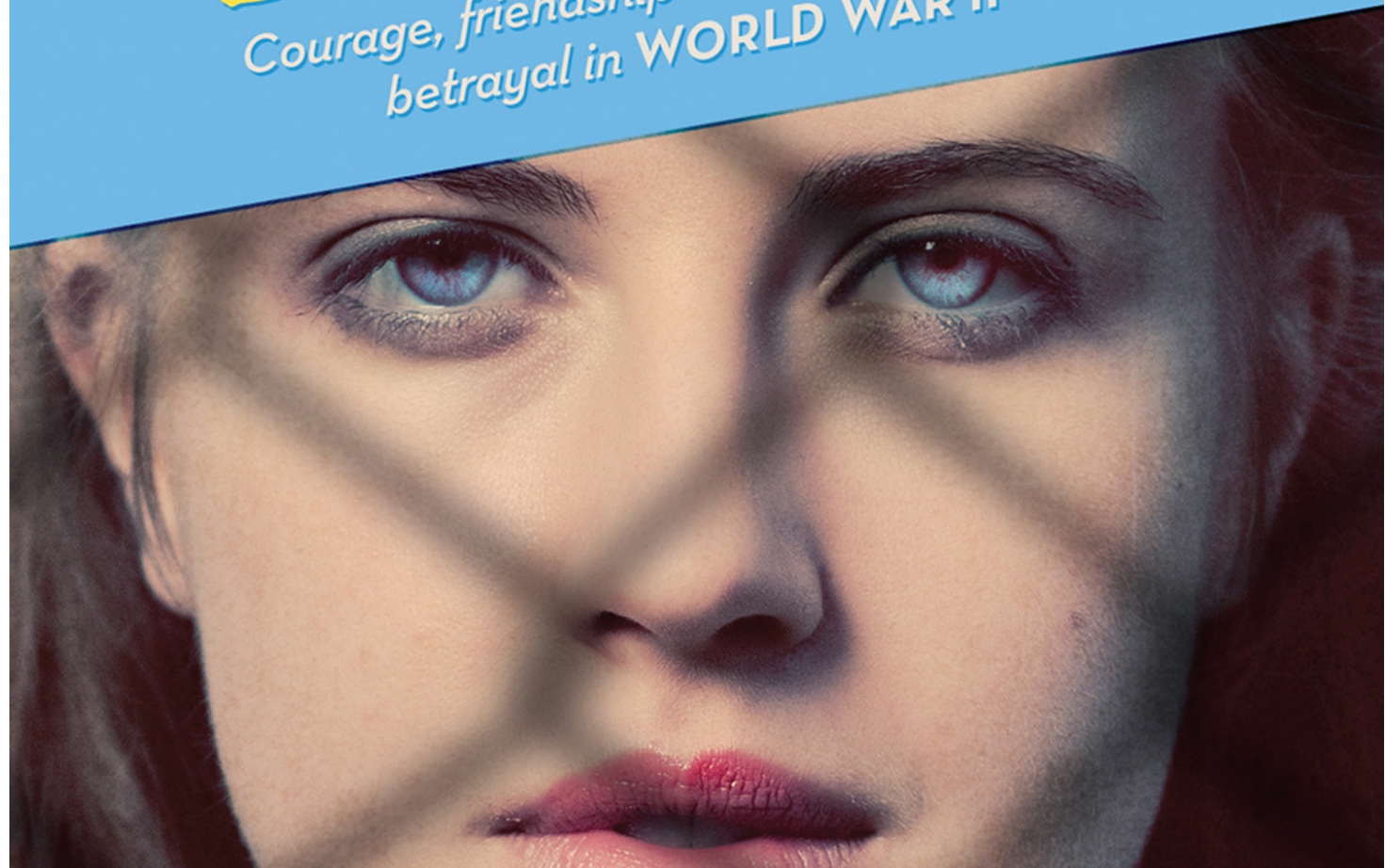
*'A remarkable book, which had me horrified and totally gripped at the same time'* DAILY MAIL



CODE NAME

# Verity

Courage, friendship and  
betrayal in WORLD WAR II



Elizabeth Wein  
**Code Name Verity**

«HarperCollins»

## **Wein E. E.**

Code Name Verity / E. E. Wein — «HarperCollins»,

This enhanced edition features exclusive material and bonus content. In addition to the novel, this ebook includes:– ‘Something Worth Doing’: the short story that inspired Code Name Verity, never before published in the UK- A filmed interview with Elizabeth- Exclusive footage of Elizabeth Wein at The Shuttleworth Collection, home to some of the oldest operational aircraft in the world- The Verity Collection: a fascinating documentary of Elizabeth’s personal collection of WW2 memorabiliaTwo young women become unlikely best friends during World War II, until one is captured by the Gestapo.Only in wartime could a stalwart lass from Manchester rub shoulders with a Scottish aristocrat. But then a vital mission goes wrong, and one of the friends has to bail out of a faulty plane over France. She is captured by the Gestapo and becomes a prisoner of war. The story begins in “Verity”’s own words, as she writes her account for her captors.Truth or lies? Honour or betrayal? Everything they’ve ever believed in is put to the test ... A gripping thriller, Code Name Verity blends a work of fiction into 20th century history with spine-tingling results. A book for young adults like no other.“This is a remarkable book” Daily Mail

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## PRAISE FOR CODE NAME VERITY

'*Code Name Verity* does more than stick with me. **It haunts me.** I just can't recommend it enough'

Author Maggie Stiefvater

'I liked *Code Name Verity* enormously . . . you are sucked into the viewpoint and don't realise for a long time that everything is **double edged** and has a **second meaning**'

Author Helen Dunmore

'A **fiendishly plotted** mind game of a novel, the kind you have to read twice'

Majorie Ingalls, New York Times

'An **utterly compelling**, gripping novel that parachutes you into a vividly real world, and challenges everything you think you know. I found it **impossible to put down**'

Author Rowan Coleman

*Also by Elizabeth Wein*

## ROSE UNDER FIRE

# CODE NAME VERITY

AN EGMONT EXTRAS EDITION

A special edition of Elizabeth Wein's award-winning novel, including exclusive videos of the author on location at The Shuttleworth Collection, a peep into her personal collection of memorabilia and the short story that began it all, never previously published in the UK.



# CODE NAME VERITY

## Features

[Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein](#)

[An Interview with Elizabeth Wein](#)

[Something Worth Doing](#)

[The Shuttleworth Videos:](#)

[‘Fly the Plane, Maddie’](#)

[The ATA](#)

SOE Agent Odette Hallowes

Anti-aircraft Gun

Tiger Moth

‘Careless Talk Costs Lives’

[The Verity Collection](#)

[Preview – Rose Under Fire](#)

## For Amanda —*we make a sensational team*—

‘Passive resisters must understand that they are as important as saboteurs.’  
*SOE Secret Operations Manual*,  
‘Methods of Passive Resistance’

### Part 1

Ormaie 8.XI.43 JB-S

I AM A COWARD

I wanted to be heroic and I pretended I was. I have always been good at pretending. I spent the first twelve years of my life playing at the Battle of Stirling Bridge with my five big brothers, and even though I am a girl they let me be William Wallace, who is supposed to be one of our ancestors, because I did the most rousing battle speeches. God, I tried hard last week. My God, *I tried*. But now I know I am a coward. After the ridiculous deal I made with SS-Hauptsturmführer von Linden, I know I am a coward. And I’m going to give you anything you ask, everything I can remember. Absolutely *Every Last Detail*.

Here is the deal we made. I’m putting it down to keep it straight in my own mind. ‘Let’s try this,’ the Hauptsturmführer said to me. ‘How could you be bribed?’ And I said I wanted my clothes back.

It seems petty, now. I am sure he was expecting my answer to be something defiant – ‘Give me Freedom’ or ‘Victory’ – or something generous, like ‘Stop toying with that wretched French Resistance laddie and give him a dignified and merciful death.’ Or at least something more directly connected to my present circumstance, like ‘Please let me go to sleep’ or ‘Feed me’ or ‘Get rid of this sodding iron rail you have kept tied against my spine for the past three days.’ But I was prepared to go sleepless and starving and upright for a good while yet if only I didn’t have to do it in my underwear – rather foul and damp at times, and SO EMBARRASSING. The warmth and dignity of my flannel skirt and woolly jumper are worth far more to me now than patriotism or integrity.

So von Linden sold my clothes back to me piece by piece. Except my scarf and stockings of course, which were taken away early on to prevent me strangling myself with them (I did try). The pullover cost me *four sets of wireless code* – the full lot of encoding poems, passwords and frequencies. Von Linden let me have the pullover back on credit straight away. It was waiting for me in my cell when they finally untied me at the end of that dreadful three days, though I was incapable of getting the damned thing on at first; but even just dragged over the top of me like a shawl it was comforting. Now that I’ve managed to get into it at last I don’t think I shall ever take it off again. The skirt and blouse cost rather less than the pullover, and it was only one code set apiece for my shoes.

There are eleven sets in all. The last one was supposed to buy my slip. Notice how he’s worked it that I get the clothes from the *outside in*, so I have to go through the torment of *undressing* in front of everybody every time another item is given back to me. He’s the only one who doesn’t watch – he threatened to take it all away from me again when I suggested he was missing a fabulous show. It was the first time the accumulated damage has really been on display and I wish he would have *looked* at his masterpiece – at my arms particularly – also the first time I have been able to stand in a while, which I wanted to show off to him. Anyway I have decided to do without my slip, which also saves me the trouble of stripping again to put it on, and in exchange for the last code set I have bought myself a supply of ink and paper – and some time.

Von Linden has said I have got two weeks and that I can have as much paper as I need. All I have to do is cough up everything I can remember about the British War Effort. And I’m going to.

Von Linden resembles Captain Hook in that he is rather an upright sort of gentleman in spite of his being a brute, and I am quite Pan-like in my naïve confidence that he will play by the rules and keep his word. So far he *has*. To start off my confession, he has given me this lovely creamy embossed stationery from the Château de Bordeaux, the Bordeaux Castle Hotel, which is what this building used to be. (I would not have believed a French hotel could become so forbiddingly bleak if I had not seen the barred shutters and padlocked doors with my own eyes. But you have also managed to make the whole beautiful city of Ormaie look bleak.)

It is rather a lot to be resting on a single code set, but in addition to my treasonous account I have also promised von Linden my soul, although I do not think he takes this seriously. Anyway it will be a relief to write *anything* that isn't connected with code. I'm so dreadfully sick of spewing wireless code. Only when we'd put all those lists to paper did I realise what a huge supply of code I do actually have in me.

It's jolly astonishing really.

YOU STUPID NAZI BASTARDS.

I'm just damned. I am utterly and completely damned. You'll shoot me at the end no matter what I do, because that's what you do to enemy agents. It's what *we* do to enemy agents. After I write this confession, if you *don't* shoot me and I ever make it home, I'll be tried and shot as a collaborator anyway. But I look at all the dark and twisted roads ahead and this is the easy one, the obvious one. What's in my future – a tin of kerosene poured down my throat and a match held to my lips? Scalpel and acid, like the Resistance boy who won't talk? My living skeleton packed up in a cattle wagon with two hundred desperate others, carted off God knows where to die of thirst before we get there? No. I'm not travelling those roads. This is the easiest. The others are too frightening even to look down.

I am going to write in English. I don't have the vocabulary for a warfare account in French, and I can't write fluently enough in German. Someone will have to translate for Hauptsturmführer von Linden; Fräulein Engel can do it. She speaks English very well. She is the one who explained to me that paraffin and kerosene are the same thing. We call it paraffin at home, but the Americans call it kerosene, and that is more or less what the word sounds like in French and German too.

(About the paraffin, kerosene, whatever it is. I do not really believe you have a litre of kerosene to waste on me. Or do you get it on the black market? How do you claim the expense? '1 lt. highly explosive fuel for execution of British spy.' Anyway I will do my best to spare you the expense.)

One of the first items on the very long list I have been given to think about including in my confession is Location of British Airfields for Invasion of Europe. Fräulein Engel will confirm that I burst out laughing when I read that. You really think I know a damned thing about where the Allies are planning to launch their invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe? I am in the Special Operations Executive because I can speak French and German and am good at making up stories, and I am a prisoner in the Ormaie Gestapo HQ because I have no sense of direction whatsoever. Bearing in mind that the people who trained me encouraged my blissful ignorance of airfields just so I *couldn't* tell you such a thing if you *did* catch me, and not forgetting that I wasn't even told the name of the airfield we took off from when I came here, let me remind you that I had been in France less than 48 hours before that obliging agent of yours had to stop me being run over by a French van full of French chickens because I'd looked the wrong way before crossing the street. Which shows how cunning the Gestapo are. 'This person I've pulled from beneath the wheels of certain death was expecting traffic to travel on the left side of the road. Therefore she must be British, and is likely to have parachuted into Nazi-occupied France out of an Allied plane. I shall now arrest her as a spy.'

So, I have no sense of direction; in some of us it is a TRAGIC FLAW, and there is no point in me trying to direct you to Locations of Any Airfields Anywhere. Not without someone giving me the coordinates. I could make them up, perhaps, and be convincing about it, to buy myself more time, but you would catch on eventually.

Aircraft Types in Operational Use is also on this list of things I am to tell you. God, this is a funny list. If I knew or cared a damned thing about aircraft types I would be flying planes for the Air Transport Auxiliary like Maddie, the pilot who dropped me here, or working as a fitter, or a mechanic. Not cravenly coughing up facts and figures for the Gestapo. (I will not mention my cowardice again because it is beginning to make me feel indecent. Also I do not want you to get bored and take this handsome paper away and go back to holding my face in a basin of ice water until I pass out.)

No, wait, I do know some aircraft types. I will tell you all the aircraft types I know, starting with the Puss Moth. That was the first aircraft my friend Maddie ever flew. In fact it was the first aircraft she ever had a ride in, and even the first one she ever got close to. And the story of how I came to be here starts with Maddie. I don't think I'll ever know how I ended up carrying her National Registration card and pilot's licence instead of my own ID when you picked me up, but if I tell you about Maddie you'll understand why we flew here together.

#### *Aircraft Types*

Maddie is properly Margaret Brodatt. You have her ID, you know her name. Brodatt is not a Northern English name, it is a Russian name, I think, because her grandfather came from Russia. But Maddie is pure Stockport. Unlike me, she has an excellent sense of direction. She can navigate by the stars, and by dead reckoning, but I think she learned to use her sense of direction properly because her granddad gave her a motorbike for her sixteenth birthday. That was Maddie away out of Stockport and up the unmade lanes on the high moors of the Pennine hills. You can see the Pennines all around the city of Stockport, green and bare with fast-moving stripes of cloud and sunlight gliding overhead like a Technicolor moving picture. I know because I went on leave for a weekend and stayed with Maddie and her grandparents, and she took me on her motorbike up the Dark Peak, one of the most wonderful afternoons of my life. It was winter and the sun came out only for about five minutes and even then the sleet didn't stop falling – it was because the weather was forecast so unflyable that she had the three days off. But for five minutes Cheshire seemed green and sparkling. Maddie's granddad owns a bike shop and he got some black market petrol for her specially when I visited. I am putting this down (even though it's nothing to do with Aircraft Types) because it proves that I know what I'm talking about when I describe what it was like for Maddie to be alone at the top of the world, deafened by the roar of four winds and two cylinders, with all the Cheshire plain and its green fields and red chimneys thrown at her feet like a tartan picnic blanket.

Maddie had a friend called Beryl who had left school, and in the summer of 1938 Beryl was working in the cotton mill at Ladderal, and they liked to take Sunday picnics on Maddie's motorbike because it was the only time they saw each other any more. Beryl rode with her arms tight round Maddie's waist, like I did that time. No goggles for Beryl, or for me, though Maddie had her own. On this particular June Sunday they rode up through the lanes between the drystone walls that Beryl's labouring ancestors had built, and over the top of Highdown Rise, with mud up their bare shins. Beryl's best skirt was ruined that day and her dad made her pay for a new one out of her next week's wages.

'I love your granddad,' Beryl shouted in Maddie's ear. 'I wish he was mine.' (I wished that too.) 'Fancy him giving you a Silent Superb for your birthday!'

'It's not so silent,' Maddie shouted back over her shoulder. 'It wasn't new when I got it, and it's five years old now. I've had to rebuild the engine this year.'

'Won't your granddad do it for you?'

'He wouldn't even give it to me until I'd taken the engine apart. I have to do it myself or I can't have it.'

'I still love him,' Beryl shouted.

They tore along the high green lanes of Highdown Rise, along tractor ruts that nearly bounced them over drystone field walls and into a bed of mire and nettles and sheep. I remember and I know what it must have been like. Every now and then, round a corner or at the crest of a hump in the

hill, you can see the bare green chain of the Pennines stretching serenely to the west, or the factory chimneys of South Manchester scrawling the blue north sky with black smoke.

‘And you’ll have a skill,’ Beryl yelled.

‘A what?’

‘A *skill*.’

‘Fixing engines!’ Maddie howled.

‘It’s a skill. Better than loading shuttles.’

‘You’re getting paid for loading shuttles,’ Maddie yelled back. ‘I don’t get paid.’ The lane ahead was rutted with rain-filled potholes. It looked like a miniature landscape of Highland lochs. Maddie slowed the bike to a putter and finally had to stop. She put her feet down on solid earth, her skirt rucked up to her thighs, still feeling the Superb’s reliable and familiar rumble all through her body. ‘Who’ll give a girl a job fixing engines?’ Maddie said. ‘Gran wants me to learn to type. At least you’re earning.’

They had to get off the bike to walk it along the ditch-filled lane. Then there was another rise, and they came to a farm gate set between field boundaries, and Maddie leaned the motorbike against the stone wall so they could eat their sandwiches. They looked at each other and laughed at the mud.

‘What’ll your dad say!’ Maddie exclaimed.

‘What’ll your gran!’

‘She’s used to it.’

Beryl’s word for picnic was ‘baggin’, Maddie said, doorstep slices of granary loaf Beryl’s auntie baked for three families every Wednesday, and pickled onions as big as apples. Maddie’s sandwiches were on rye bread from the baker’s in Reddyke where her grandmother sent her every Friday. The pickled onions stopped Maddie and Beryl having a conversation because chewing made so much crunching in their heads they couldn’t hear each other talk, and they had to be careful swallowing so they wouldn’t be asphyxiated by an accidental blast of vinegar. (Perhaps Chief-Storm-Captain von Linden might find pickled onions useful as persuasive tools. And your prisoners would get fed at the same time.)

(Fräulein Engel instructs me to put down here, for Captain von Linden to know when he reads it, that I have wasted 20 minutes of the time given me because here in my story I laughed at my own stupid joke about the pickled onions and broke the pencil point. We had to wait for someone to bring a knife to sharpen it because Miss Engel is not allowed to leave me by myself. And then I wasted another 5 minutes weeping after I snapped off the new point straight away because Miss E. had sharpened it very close to my face, flicking the shavings into my eyes while SS-Scharführer Thibaut held my head still, and it made me terribly nervous. I am not laughing or crying now and will try not to press so hard after this.)

At any rate, think of Maddie before the war, free and at home with her mouth full of pickled onion – she could only point and choke when a spluttering, smoking aircraft hove into view above their heads and circled the field they were overlooking as they perched on the gate. That aircraft was a Puss Moth.

I can tell you a bit about Puss Moths. They are fast, light monoplanes – you know, only one set of wings – the Tiger Moth is a biplane and has two sets (another type I have just remembered). You can fold the Puss Moth’s wings back for trucking the machine around or storing it, and it has a super view from the cockpit, and can seat two passengers as well as the pilot. I have been a passenger in one a couple of times. I think the upgraded version is called a Leopard Moth (that’s three aircraft I have named in one paragraph!).

This Puss Moth circling the field at Highdown Rise, the first Puss Moth Maddie ever came across, was choking to death. Maddie said it was like having a ringside seat at the circus. With the plane at three hundred feet she and Beryl could see every detail of the machine in miniature: every

wire, every strut of its pair of canvas wings, the flicker of the wooden propeller blades as they spun ineffectively in the wind. Great blue clouds of smoke billowed from the exhaust.

‘He’s on fire!’ screamed Beryl in a fit of delighted panic.

‘He’s not on fire. He’s burning oil,’ Maddie said because she knows these things. ‘If he has any sense he’ll shut everything off and it’ll stop. Then he can glide down.’

They watched. Maddie’s prediction came true: the engine stopped and the smoke drifted away, and now the pilot was clearly planning to put his damaged rig down in the field right in front of them. It was a grazing field, unploughed, unmown, without any livestock in it. The wings above their heads cut out the sun for a second with the sweep and billow of a sailing yacht. The aircraft’s final pass pulled all the litter of their lunch out into the field, brown crusts and brown paper fluttering in the blue smoke like the devil’s confetti.

Maddie says it would have been a good landing if it had been on an aerodrome. In the field the wounded flying machine bounced haplessly over the unmown grass for thirty yards. Then it tipped up gracefully on to its nose.

Unthinkingly, Maddie broke into applause. Beryl grabbed her hands and smacked one of them.

‘You gormless cow! He might be hurt! Oh, what shall we do!’

Maddie hadn’t meant to clap. She had done it without thinking. I can picture her, blowing the curling black hair out of her eyes, with her lower lip jutting out before she jumped down from the gate and hopped over the green tussocks to the downed plane.

There were no flames. Maddie scaled her way up the Puss Moth’s nose to get at the cockpit and put one of her hobnailed shoes through the fabric that covered the fuselage (I think that’s what the body of the plane is called) and I bet she cringed; she hadn’t meant to do that either. She was feeling very hot and bothered by the time she unlatched the door, expecting a lecture from the aircraft’s owner, and was shamefully relieved to find the pilot hanging upside-down in half-undone harness straps and clearly stone-cold unconscious. Maddie glanced over the alien engine controls. No oil pressure (she told me all this). Throttle, out. Off. Good enough. Maddie untangled the harness and let the pilot slither to the ground.

Beryl was there to catch the dragging weight of the pilot’s senseless body. It was easier for Maddie to get down off the plane than it had been for her to get up, just a light hop to the ground. Maddie unbuckled the pilot’s helmet and goggles; she and Beryl had both done First Aid in Girl Guides, for all that’s worth, and knew enough to make sure the casualty could breathe.

Beryl began to giggle.

‘Who’s the gormless cow!’ Maddie exclaimed.

‘It’s a girl!’ Beryl laughed. ‘It’s a girl!’

—  
Beryl stayed with the unconscious girl pilot while Maddie rode her Silent Superb to the farm to get help. She found two big strong lads her own age shovelling cow dung, and the farmer’s wife sorting First Early potatoes and cursing a cotillion of girls who were doing a huge jigsaw on the old stone kitchen floor (it was Sunday, or they’d have been boiling laundry). A rescue squad was despatched. Maddie was sent further down the lane on her bike to the bottom of the hill where there was a pub and a phone box.

‘She’ll need an ambulance, tha knows, love,’ the farmer’s wife had said to Maddie kindly. ‘She’ll need to go to hospital if she’s been flying an aeroplane.’

The words rattled around in Maddie’s head all the way to the telephone. Not ‘She’ll need to go to hospital if she’s been injured,’ but ‘She’ll need to go to hospital if she’s been flying an aeroplane.’

A flying girl! thought Maddie. A girl flying an aeroplane!

No, she corrected herself; a girl *not* flying a plane. A girl tipping up a plane in a sheep field.

But she flew it first. She had to be able to fly it in order to land it (or crash it).

The leap seemed logical to Maddie.

I've never crashed my motorbike, she thought. I could fly an aeroplane.

There are a few more types of aircraft that I know, but what comes to mind is the Lysander. That is the plane Maddie was flying when she dropped me here. She was actually supposed to land the plane, not dump me out of it in the air. We got fired at on the way in and for a while the tail was in flames and she couldn't control it properly, and she made me bail out before she tried to land. I didn't see her come down. But you showed me the photos you took at the site, so I know that she *has* crashed an aeroplane by now. Still, you can hardly blame it on the pilot when her plane gets hit by anti-aircraft fire.

*Some British Support for Anti-Semitism*

The Puss Moth crash was on Sunday. Beryl was back to work at the mill in Ladderal the next day. My heart twists up and shrivels with envy so black and painful that I spoiled half this page with tears before I realised they were falling, to think of Beryl's long life of loading shuttles and raising snotty babies with a beery lad in an industrial suburb of Manchester. Of course that was in 1938 and they have all been bombed to bits since, so perhaps Beryl and her kiddies are dead already, in which case my tears of envy are very selfish. I am sorry about the paper. Miss E. is looking over my shoulder as I write and tells me not to interrupt my story with any more apologies.

Over the next week Maddie pieced together the pilot's story in a storm of newspaper clippings with the mental wolfishness of Lady Macbeth. The pilot's name was Dympna Wythenshawe (I remember her name because it is so silly). She was the spoiled youngest daughter of Sir Somebody-or-other Wythenshawe. On Friday there was a flurry of outrage in the evening paper because as soon as she was released from hospital, she started giving joyrides in her other aeroplane (a Dragon Rapide – how clever am I), while the Puss Moth was being mended. Maddie sat on the floor in her granddad's shed next to her beloved Silent Superb, which needed a lot of tinkering to keep it in a fit state for weekend outings, and fought with the newspaper. There were pages and pages of gloom about the immediate likelihood of war between Japan and China, and the growing likelihood of war in Europe. The nose-down Puss Moth in the farmer's field on Highdown Rise was last week's news though; there were no pictures of the plane on Friday, only a grinning mugshot of the aviatrix herself, looking happy and windblown and much, much prettier than that idiot Fascist Oswald Mosley, whose sneering face glared out at Maddie from the prime spot at the top of the page. Maddie covered him up with her mug of cocoa and thought about the quickest way to get to Catton Park Aerodrome. It was a good distance, but tomorrow was Saturday again.

Maddie was sorry, the next morning, that she hadn't paid more attention to the Oswald Mosley story. He was there, there in Stockport, speaking in front of St Mary's on the edge of the Saturday market, and his idiot Fascist followers were having their own march to meet him, starting at the town hall and ending up at St Mary's, causing traffic and human mayhem. They had by then toned down their anti-Semitism a bit and this rally was supposed to be in the name of Peace, believe it or not, trying to convince everybody that it would be a good idea to keep things cordial with the idiot Fascists in Germany. The Mosleyites were no longer allowed to wear their tastelessly symbolic black shirts – there was now a law in place about public marching in political uniforms, mainly to stop the Mosleyites causing riots like the ones they started with their marches through Jewish neighbourhoods in London. But they were going along to cheer for Mosley anyway. There was a happy crowd of his lovers and an angry crowd of his haters. There were women with baskets trying to get their shopping done at the Saturday market. There were policemen. There was livestock – some of the policemen were on horseback, and there was a herd of sheep being shunted through also on the way to market, and a horse-drawn milk cart stuck in the middle of the sheep. There were dogs. Probably there were cats and rabbits and chickens and ducks too.

Maddie could not get across the Stockport Road. (I don't know what it's really called. Perhaps that's its right name because it's the main road in from the south. You should not rely on any of my directions.) Maddie waited and waited on the edge of the simmering crowd, looking for a gap. After

twenty minutes, she began to get annoyed. There were people pressing against her from behind now, as well. She tried to turn her motorbike round, walking it by the handlebars, and ran into someone.

‘Oi! Mind where you’re pushing that bike!’

‘Sorry!’ Maddie looked up.

It was a crowd of thugs, black-shirted for the rally even though they could get arrested for it, hair slicked back with Brylcreem like a bunch of airmen. They looked Maddie up and down gleefully, pretty sure she would be easy bait.

‘Nice bike.’

‘Nice legs!’

One of them giggled through his nose. ‘Nice —.’

He used an ugly, unspeakable word, and I won’t bother to write it because I don’t think any of you would know what it means in English, and I certainly do not know the French or German for it. The thuggish lad used it like a goading stick and it worked. Maddie shoved the front wheel of the bike past the one she had hit in the first place, and knocked into him again, and he grabbed the handlebars with his own big fists between her hands.

Maddie held on. They struggled for a moment over the motorbike. The boy refused to let go, and his mates laughed.

‘What’s a lass like you need with a big toy like this? Where’d you get it?’

‘At the bike shop, where d’you think!’

‘Brodatt’s,’ said one of them. There was only one on that side of town.

‘Sells bikes to Jews, he does.’

‘Maybe it’s a Jew’s bike.’

You probably don’t know it, but Manchester and its smoky suburbs have got quite a large Jewish population and nobody minds. Well, obviously some idiot Fascists do mind, but I think you see what I mean. They came from Russia and Poland and later Roumania and Austria, all Eastern Europe, all through the nineteenth century. The bike shop whose customers were in question happened to be Maddie’s granddad’s bike shop that he’d had for the last thirty years. He’d done quite well out of it, well enough to keep Maddie’s stylish gran in the manner to which she is accustomed, and they live in a large old house in Grove Green on the edge of the city and have a gardener and a daily girl to do the housekeeping. Anyway when this lot started slinging venom at Maddie’s granddad’s shop, Maddie unwisely engaged in battle with them and said, ‘Does it always take all three of you to complete a thought? Or can you each do it without your mates if you have enough time to think it over first?’

They pushed the bike over. It took Maddie down with it. Because bullying is what idiot Fascists like best.

But there was a swell of noisy outrage from other people in the crowded street, and the little gang of thugs laughed again and moved on. Maddie could hear the one lad’s distinctive nasal whinny even after his back had become anonymous.

More people than had knocked her down came to her aid, a labourer and a girl with a pram and a kiddie and two women with shopping baskets. They hadn’t fought or interfered, but they helped Maddie up and dusted her off and the workman ran loving hands down the Silent Superb’s mudguard.

‘Tha’s not hurt, miss?’

‘Nice bike!’

That was the kiddie. His mum said quickly, ‘Oi, you hush,’ because it was a perfect echo of the black-shirted youth who had pushed Maddie over.

‘Tis nice,’ said the man.

‘It’s getting old,’ Maddie said modestly, but pleased.

‘Ruddy vandals.’

‘Tha wants to get those knees seen to, love,’ advised one of the ladies with baskets.

Maddie thought to herself, thinking about aeroplanes: Just you wait, you idiot Fascists. I am going to get me a bigger toy than this bike.

Maddie's faith in humanity was restored and she pushed her way out of the crowd and set off down the cobbled back lanes of Stockport. There was no one here but kiddies playing street football in screaming bunches, and harassed big sisters with their hair tied up in dust cloths, ungraciously shaking out rugs and scrubbing front doorsteps while their mothers shopped. I swear I shall weep with envy if I keep thinking about them, bombed to bits or otherwise.

Fräulein Engel has been looking over my shoulder once again and has asked me to stop writing 'idiot Fascist' because she thinks Hauptsturmführer von Linden will not like it. I think she is a bit scared of Capt. von Linden (who can blame her), and I think Scharführer Thibaut is scared of him too.

*Location of British Airfields*

I can't really believe you need me to tell you that Catton Park Aerodrome is in Ilsmere Port because for the last ten years it has been just about the busiest airfield in the north of England. They build planes there. Before the war it had a posh civil flying club and it has also been a Royal Air Force base for years. The local Royal Air Force squadron has been flying bombers from that field since 1936. Your guess is as good as mine, and probably a lot better, as to what they are using it for now (I don't doubt it's surrounded with barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns). When Maddie pulled up there that Saturday morning, she stood for a moment goggling gormlessly (her word), first at the car park, which contained the biggest collection of expensive cars she'd ever seen in one place, and then at the sky, which contained the biggest collection of aeroplanes. She leaned against the fence to watch. After a few minutes, she worked out that most of the planes seemed to fly to a kind of pattern, taking it in turns to land and roar away again. Half an hour later she was still watching, and could tell that one of the pilots was a beginner and his machine always bounced six feet in the air after touching down before properly connecting with the ground, and another one was practising absolutely insane aerobatic manoeuvres, and another one was giving rides to people – once round the airfield, five minutes in the air, back down, hand over your two shillings and swap your goggles with the next customer, please.

It was a very overwhelming place in that uneasy peacetime when military and civil pilots took it in turns to use the runway, but Maddie was determined, and followed the signs to the flying club. She found the person she was looking for by accident – easily really, because Dympna Wythenshawe was the only idle aviator on the field, lounging by herself in a long row of faded deckchairs lined up in front of the pilots' clubhouse. Maddie did not recognise the pilot. She looked nothing like either the glamorous mugshot from the papers or the unconscious, helmeted casualty she had been when Maddie left her that Sunday past. Dympna didn't recognise Maddie either, but she called out jovially, 'Are you hoping for a spin?'

She spoke in a cultured accent of money and privilege. Rather like mine, without the Scottish burr. Probably not as privileged as mine, but more moneyed. Anyway it made Maddie instantly feel like a serving girl.

'I'm looking for Dympna Wythenshawe,' said Maddie. 'I just wanted to see how she's getting on after – after last week.'

'She's fine.' The elegant creature smiled pleasantly.

'I found her,' Maddie blurted.

'She's right as rain,' Dympna said, offering a languid, lily-white hand that had certainly never changed an oil filter (my lily-white hands *have*, I would like you to know, but only under strict supervision). 'She's right as rain. She's me.'

Maddie shook hands.

'Take a pew,' Dympna drawled (just imagine she's me, raised in a castle and educated at a Swiss boarding school, only a lot taller and not snivelling all the time). She waved to the empty deckchairs. 'There's plenty of room.'

She was dressed as though she were going on safari, and contrived to be glamorous about it too. She gave private instruction as well as joyrides. She was the only woman pilot at the aerodrome, certainly the only woman instructor.

‘When my darling Puss Moth’s mended, I’ll give you a ride,’ she offered Maddie, and Maddie, who is nothing if not calculating, asked if she could see the plane.

They had taken it to bits and carted it home from Highdown Rise and now a team of boys and men in greasy overalls were working at putting it back together in one of a long line of high workshop sheds. The Puss Moth’s lovely engine (this is Maddie talking; she is a bit mad) had only HALF THE POWER of Maddie’s motorbike. They had taken it apart and were cleaning the bits of turf out of it with wire brushes. It lay on a square of oilcloth in a thousand gleaming pieces. Maddie knew instantly she had come to the right place.

‘Oh, can I watch?’ she said. And Dympna, who never got her hands dirty, could nevertheless name every cylinder and valve that was lying on the floor, and let Maddie have a go painting the new fabric (over the fuselage she’d kicked in) with a mess of plastic goo that smelled like pickled onions. After an hour had gone by and Maddie was still there asking what all the parts of the plane were for and what they were called, the mechanics gave her a wire brush and let her help.

Maddie said she always felt very safe, after that, flying in Dympna’s Puss Moth, because she had helped to put its engine back together herself.

‘When are you coming back?’ Dympna asked her over oily mugs of tea, four hours later.

‘It’s too far for me to visit very often,’ Maddie confessed sadly. ‘I live in Stockport. I help my granddad in his office in the week and he pays for my petrol, but I can’t come here every weekend.’

‘You are the luckiest girl alive,’ Dympna said. ‘As soon as the Puss Moth’s flying again I’m moving both my planes to the new airfield at Oakway. It’s right by Ladderall Mill, where your friend Beryl works. There’s a big gala at Oakway next Saturday, for the airfield’s official opening. I’ll come and collect you and you can watch the fun from the pilots’ stand. Beryl can come along too.’

That’s two airfields I’ve located for you.

I am getting a bit wobbly because no one has let me eat or drink since yesterday and I have been writing for nine hours. So now I am going to risk tossing this pencil across the table and have a good howl

Ormaie 9.XI.43 JB-S

This pen does not work. Sorry ink blots. Is this test or punishment I want my pencil back

[Note to SS-Hauptsturmführer Amadeus von Linden, translated from the German:]

The English Flight Officer is telling the truth. The ink given her was too old/too thick to use and clotted badly in the pen nib. It has now been thinned and I am testing it here to affirm that it is acceptable for writing.

Heil Hitler!

SS-Scharführer Etienne Thibaut

—

You ignorant Quisling *bastard*, SS-Scharführer Etienne Thibaut, I AM SCOTTISH.

The comedians Laurel and Hardy, I mean Underling-Sergeant Thibaut and On-Duty-Female-Guard Engel, have been very jolly at my expense over the inferior ink Thibaut found for me to write with. He ruddy well had to thin it with *kerosene*, didn’t he. He was annoyed when I made a fuss over the ink and he didn’t seem to believe me about the clogged pen, so I became *rather upset* when he went away and came back with a litre of kerosene. When he brought in the tin, I knew straight away what it was, and Miss E. had to throw a jug of water in my face to stop my hysterics. Now she is sitting across the table from me lighting and relighting her cigarette and flicking the matches in my direction to make me jump, but she is laughing as she does it.

She was anxious last night because she didn’t think I’d coughed up enough facts to count as a proper little Judas yesterday. Again I think that she was worrying about von Linden’s reaction, as she

is the one who has to translate what I write for him. As it turned out he said it was an ‘interesting overview of the situation in Britain over the long term’ and a ‘curious individual perspective’ (he was testing my German a bit while we talked about it). Also I think he hopes I will do some rapping on Monsieur Laurel and Mademoiselle Hardy. He does not trust Thibaut because Thibaut is French and he does not trust Engel because Engel is a woman. I am to be given water throughout the day while I write (to drink, as well as to prevent hysterics) *and* a blanket. For a blanket in my cold little room, SS-Hauptsturmführer Amadeus von Linden, I would without remorse or hesitation rat on my heroic ancestor William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland.

I know your other prisoners despise me. Thibaut took me to . . . I don’t know what you call it when you make me watch, is it *instruction*? To remind me how fortunate I am, perhaps? After my tantrum yesterday, when I had stopped writing and before I was allowed to eat, on the way back to my cell Scharführer Thibaut made me stop and watch while Jacques was being questioned again. (I don’t know what his real name is; *Jacques* is what the French citizens all call each other in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and it seems appropriate.) That boy *hates* me. It makes no difference that I too am strapped securely to my own chair with piano wire or something and gasp with sobs on his account and look away the whole time except when Thibaut holds my head in place. Jacques knows, they all know, that I am the collaborator, the only coward among them. No one else has given out a single scrap of code – let alone ELEVEN SETS – not to mention a written confession. He spits at me as they drag him out.

‘Little Scottish piece of shit.’

It sounds so pretty in French, *p’tit morceau de merde écossaise*. Single-handedly I have brought down the 700-year-strong Auld Alliance between France and Scotland.

There is another Jacques, a girl, who whistles ‘Scotland the Brave’ if we are taken past each other (my prison is an antechamber to the suite they use for interrogations), or some other battle hymn associated with my heritage, and she spits too. They all detest me. It is not the same as their hatred for Thibaut, the Quisling turncoat, who is their countryman and is working for the enemy. I am your enemy too, I should be one of them. But I am beyond contempt. A wee Scots piece o’ shite.

Don’t you think it makes them stronger when you give them someone to despise? They look at me snivelling in the corner and think, ‘*Mon Dieu*. Don’t ever let me be like *her*.’

*The Civil Air Guard (Some Figures)*

That heading looks terrifically official. I feel better already. Like a proper little Judas.

Suppose you were a girl in Stockport in 1938, raised by loving and indulgent grandparents and rather obsessed with engines. Suppose you decided you wanted to learn to fly: really *fly*. You wanted to fly aeroplanes.

A three-year course with Air Service Training would have cost you over a thousand pounds. I don’t know what Maddie’s granddad would have earned in a year back then. He did fairly well with his motorbike business, as I have said, not so well during the Depression, but still, by our standards then, anyone would have considered his a good living. At any rate it would have cost him most of his year’s earnings to buy Maddie one year of flying lessons. She got her first flight free, an hour’s excursion in Dympna’s restored Puss Moth on a glorious clear summer evening of crisp wind and long light, and saw the Pennines from above for the first time. Beryl got to come along for the ride, since she had been as much involved in Dympna’s rescue as Maddie had, but Beryl had to sit in the very back and couldn’t see so well and was sick into her handbag. She thanked Dympna but never went for another flight.

And of course that was a joyride, not a lesson. Maddie couldn’t afford lessons. But she made Oakway Aerodrome her own. Oakway came into being in parallel with Maddie’s crush on aeroplanes – I want bigger toys, she’d wished, and hey presto, a week later, there was Oakway. It was only a fifteen-minute motorbike ride. It was so spanking new that the mechanics there were happy to have an extra pair of capable hands around. Maddie was out every Saturday that summer tinkering

with engines and doping fabric wings and making friends. Then in October her persistence suddenly, unexpectedly paid off. That is when we started the Civil Air Guard.

I say *we* – I mean Britain. Just about every flying club in the kingdom joined in, and so many thousands of people applied – free flight training! – that they could only take about a tenth of them. And only one in 20 of those were women. But Maddie got lucky again because all the engineers and mechanics and instructors at Oakway knew and liked her now, and she got glowing recommendations for being quick and committed and knowing all about oil levels. She wasn't straight away any better than any other pilot who trained at Oakway with the Civil Air Guard. But she wasn't any worse either. She made her first solo flight in the first week of the new year, between snow flurries.

Look at the timing though. Maddie started flying in late October 1938 . . . Hitler (you will notice that I have thought better of my colourful descriptive terms for the Führer and carefully scratched them all out) invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 and Britain declared war on Germany two days later. Maddie flew the practical test for her 'A' licence, the basic pilot's licence, six months before all civil aircraft were grounded in August. After that, most of those planes were taken into government service. Both Dympna's planes were requisitioned by the Air Ministry for communications and she was mad as a cat about it.

Days before Britain declared war on Germany, Maddie flew by herself to the other side of England, skimming the tops of the Pennines and avoiding the barrage balloons like silver ramparts protecting the sky around Newcastle. She followed the coast north to Bamburgh and Holy Island. I know that stretch of the North Sea very well because the train from Edinburgh to London goes that way, and I was up and down all year when I was at school. Then when my school closed just before the war, instead of finishing elsewhere I went to university a bit suddenly for a term and took the train to get there too, feeling very grown-up.

The Northumbrian coast is the most beautiful length of the whole trip. The sun still sets quite late in the north of England in August, and Maddie on fabric wings flew low over the long sands of Holy Island and saw seals gathered there. She flew over the great castle crags of Lindisfarne and Bamburgh to the north and south, and over the ruins of the twelfth-century priory, and over all the fields stretching yellow and green towards the low Cheviot Hills of Scotland. Maddie flew back following the 70-mile, 2000-year-old dragon's back of Hadrian's Wall, to Carlisle and then south through the Lakeland fells, along Lake Windermere. The soaring mountains rose around her and the poets' waters glittered beneath her in the valleys of memory – hosts of golden daffodils, *Swallows and Amazons*, Peter Rabbit. She came home by way of Blackstone Edge above the old Roman road to avoid the smoke haze over Manchester, and landed back at Oakway sobbing with anguish and love; *love*, for her island home that she'd seen whole and fragile from the air in the space of an afternoon, from coast to coast, holding its breath in a glass lens of summer and sunlight. All about to be swallowed in nights of flame and blackout. Maddie landed at Oakway before sunset and shut down the engine, then sat in the cockpit weeping.

More than anything else, I think, Maddie went to war on behalf of the Holy Island seals.

She climbed out of Dympna's Puss Moth at last. The late, low sun lit up the other aeroplanes in the hangar Dympna used, expensive toys about to realise their finest hour. (In less than a year that very same Puss Moth, flown by someone else, would ferry blood deliveries to the gasping British Expeditionary Force in France.) Maddie ran all the checks she'd normally run after a flight, and then started again with the ones she'd run before a flight. Dympna found her there half an hour later, still not having put the plane to bed, cleaning midges off the windscreen in the late golden light.

'You don't need to do that.'

'Someone does. I won't be flying it again, will I? Not after tomorrow. It's the only thing I *can* do, check the oil, clean the bugs.'

Dympna stood smoking calmly in the evening sunlight and watched Maddie for a while. Then she said, 'There's going to be air work for girls in this war. You wait. They're going to need all the

pilots they can get fighting for the Royal Air Force. That'll be young men, some of them with less training than you've got now, Maddie. And that'll leave the old men, and the women, to deliver new aircraft and carry their messages and taxi their pilots. That'll be us.'

'You think?'

'There's a unit forming for civil pilots to help with the War Effort. The ATA, Air Transport Auxiliary – men and women both. It'll happen any day. My name's in the pool; Pauline Gower's heading the women's section.' Pauline was a flying friend of Dympna's; Pauline had encouraged Dympna's joyriding business. 'You've not the qualifications for it, but I won't forget you, Maddie. When they open up training to girls again, I'll send you a telegram. You'll be the first.'

Maddie scrubbed at midges and scrubbed at her eyes too, too miserable to answer.

'And when you're done slaving, I'm going to make you a mug of best Oakway Pilot's Oily Tea, and tomorrow morning I'm going to march you into the nearest WAAF recruitment office.'

WAAF is Women's Auxiliary Air Force, auxiliary to the RAF, the Royal Air Force. You don't *fly* in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, but the way things are now you can do almost any job a man does, all the work associated with flying and fighting: electrician, technician, fitter, barrage balloon operator, driver, cook, hairdresser . . . You would have thought our Maddie would go for a job in mechanics, wouldn't you? So early in the war, they hadn't yet opened up those jobs to women. It didn't matter that Maddie already had a deal more experience than a lot of boys; there wasn't a place for her. But she'd already learned Morse code and a bit about radio transmission as part of her training for her pilot's 'A' licence. The Air Ministry was in a panic in August 1939, scrambling for women to do radio work as it dawned on them how many men they'd need to do the flying. Maddie joined the WAAF and eventually became a radio operator.

#### *Some WAAF Trades*

It was like being at school. I don't know if Maddie thought so too; she didn't go to a Swiss boarding school, she was at a grammar school in Manchester and she certainly never thought about going to university. Even when she was at school, she came home every day and never had to share a room with twenty girls, or sleep on a straw mattress made up of three bricks like a set of settee cushions. We called them biscuits. You were always so tired you didn't care; I would cut off my left hand to have one here. That fussy kit inspection they made you do, where you had to lay out all your worldly belongings in random but particular order on the folded blanket, like a jigsaw, and if anything was a millimetre the wrong way you got points off your score – that was just like being in school. Also all the slang, the 'square-bashing' drilling exercises, and the boring meals and the uniforms, though Maddie's group didn't get issued proper uniforms at first. They all wore matching blue cardigans, like Girl Guides (Guides don't wear Air Force blue cardigans, but you see what I mean).

Maddie was stationed at Oakway to begin with, very convenient to home. This was late 1939, early 1940. The Phoney War. Nothing much happening.

Not in Britain anyway. We were biting our nails, practising.

Waiting.

#### *Telephonist*

'You! Girl in the blue cardigan!'

Five girls in headsets looked round from their switchboards, pointed to their chests and mouthed silently, *Me?*

'Yes, you! Aircraftwoman Brodatt! What are you doing here? You're a licensed radio operator!'

Maddie pointed to her headset and the front cord she was about to connect.

'Take the damned thing off and answer me.'

Maddie turned back to her switchboard and coolly plugged in the front cord. She toggled the appropriate keys and spoke clearly into the headset. 'The Group Captain is through to you now, sir. You may go ahead.' She took off the headset and turned back to the troll who was waiting for a reply.

It was the chief flight instructor for Oakway's Royal Air Force squadron, the man who had given Maddie her flight test nearly a year ago.

'Sorry, sir. This is where I've been posted, sir.' (I did say it was like being at school.)

'Posted! You're not even any of you in uniform!'

Five dutiful Aircraftwomen First Class straightened their Air Force blue cardigans.

'We've not been issued full dress, sir.'

'Posted!' the officer repeated. 'You'll start in the radio room tomorrow, Aircraftwoman Brodatt. The operator's assistant is down with influenza.' And he lifted the headset from her console to perch it precariously over his own large head. 'Put me through to the WAAF administration unit,' he said. 'I want to talk to your Section Officer.'

Maddie flipped the keys and plugged in the cords and he gave her posting orders over her own telephone.

*Radio Operator*

'Tyro to ground, tyro to ground,' came the call from the training aircraft. 'Position uncertain, overhead triangular body of water to east of corridor.'

'Ground to tyro,' answered Maddie. 'Is it a lake or a reservoir?'

'Say again?'

'Lake or reservoir? Your triangular body of water.'

After a short silence, Maddie prompted: 'A reservoir has got a dam at one end.'

'Tyro to ground. Affirm reservoir.'

'Is it Ladyswell? Manchester barrage balloons at ten o'clock and Macclesfield at eight o'clock?'

'Tyro to ground, affirm. Position located. Overhead Ladyswell for return to Oakway.'

Maddie sighed. 'Ground to tyro, call on final approach.'

'Wilco.'

Maddie shook her head, swearing unprettily under her breath. 'Oh my sainted aunt! Unlimited visibility! Unlimited visibility except for the dirty great city in the north-west! That would be the dirty great city surrounded at 3000 feet by a few hundred silver hydrogen balloons as big as buses! How in the name of mud is he going to find *Berlin* if he can't find *Manchester*?'

There was a bit of quiet in the radio room. Then the chief radio officer said gently, 'Leading Aircraftwoman Brodatt, you're still transmitting.'

—  
'Brodatt, stop there.'

Maddie and everyone else had been told to go home. Or back to their various barracks and lodgings anyway, for an afternoon's rest. It was a day of such appallingly evil weather that the street lamps would have been lit if it weren't for fear of enemy aircraft seeing them, not that enemy aircraft can fly in such murk either. Maddie and the other WAAFs in her barracks still hadn't got proper uniforms, but as it was winter they had been issued RAF overcoats – men's overcoats. Warm, and waterproof, but ridiculous. Like wearing a tent. Maddie clutched hers tight in at the sides when the officer spoke to her, standing straight and hoping she looked smarter than she felt. She stopped so he could catch up with her, waiting on the duckboards laid over the concrete apron because there was so much standing water about that if you stepped in a puddle it came over the tops of your shoes.

'Was it you talked down my lads training in the Wellington bomber this morning?' the officer asked.

Maddie gulped. She had thrown radio protocol to the wind to guide those boys in, bullying them through a ten-minute gap in the low-lying cloud, praying they would follow her instructions without question and that she wasn't directing them straight into the explosive-rigged steel cables that tethered the barrage balloons meant to deter enemy aircraft. Now she recognised the officer: it was one of the squadron leaders.

‘Yes, sir,’ she admitted hoarsely, her chin held high. The air was so full of moisture it made her hair stick to her forehead. She waited miserably, expecting him to summon her to be court-martialled.

‘Those boys jolly well owe you their lives,’ he said to Maddie. ‘Not one of them on instruments yet and flying without a map. We shouldn’t have let them take off this morning.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ Maddie gasped.

‘Singing your praises, those lads were. Made me wonder though; have you any idea what the runway looks like from the air?’

Maddie smiled faintly. ‘I’ve a pilot’s “A” licence. Still valid. Of course I haven’t flown since August.’

‘Oh, I see!’

The RAF squadron leader set off to walk Maddie to the canteen at the airfield’s perimeter. She had to trot a little to match his stride.

‘Took your licence here at Oakway, did you? Civil Air Guard?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Instructor’s rating?’

‘No, sir. But I’ve flown at night.’

‘Now that’s unusual! Used the fog line, have you?’

He meant the fierce gas lamps that line the runway at intervals on either side so you can land in bad weather.

‘Two or three times. Not often, sir.’

‘So you *have* seen the runway from the air. And in the dark too! Well –’

Maddie waited. She really didn’t have any idea what this man was going to say next.

‘If you’re going to talk people down you’d damn well better know what the forward view from the cockpit of a Wellington bomber looks like in the landing configuration. Fancy a flight in a Wellington?’

‘Oh, yes please, sir!’

(You see – it was just like being in school.)

*Stooge*

That is not a WAAF trade. That is what they call it when you go along in an aircraft just for the ride and don’t meaningfully contribute to a successful flight. Perhaps Maddie was more of a backseat driver than a stooge.

– ‘Don’t think you’ve reset the directional gyro.’

– ‘He told you heading 270. You’ve turned east.’

– ‘Look sharp, lads, northbound aircraft at three o’clock, one thousand feet below.’

Once the electric undercarriage failed and she had to earn her keep by taking her turn at the hand pump so they didn’t have to crash-land. Once they let her ride in the gun turret. She loved that, like being a goldfish alone in an empty sky.

Once they had to lift her out of the plane after landing because she was shaking so badly she couldn’t climb down herself.

Maddie’s Wellington joyrides were not exactly clandestine, but they weren’t exactly cricket either. She was counted among the S.O.B. – Souls On Board – when the lads took off, but she certainly wasn’t authorised to be there chivvying along the novice bombing crews as they practised low flying over the high moors. So various off-and on-duty concerned people came pelting out of offices and the men’s and ladies’ tea huts, coatless and white-faced, when they saw Maddie’s RAF mates chair-lifting her in their arms across the runway.

A WAAF friend of hers called Joan and the guilty squadron leader reached her first.

‘What’s wrong? What happened? Is she hurt?’

Maddie was not hurt. She was already badgering the Wellington crew who carried her to put her down. ‘Get off, everyone will see, the girls will never let me forget it –’

*'What happened?'*

Maddie struggled to her feet and stood shivering on the concrete. 'We got fired on,' she said, and looked away, burning with shame at how much it had taken out of her.

*'Fired on!'* barked the squadron leader. This was in the spring of 1940 – the war was still in Europe. It was before the disastrous May when the Allies fled retreating to the French beaches, before the siege that was the Battle of Britain, before the thunder and flame-filled nights of the Blitz. In the spring of 1940 our skies were alert, and armed, and uneasy. But they were still safe.

'Yes, *fired on,*' echoed the Wellington pilot in fury. He was white as a sheet too. 'By those idiots manning the anti-aircraft guns at the Cattercup barrage balloons. By *our own gunners.* Who the hell's training them? Bloody daft trigger-happy morons! Wasting ammo and scaring the blue bleeding daylight out of everybody! Any school lad can spot the difference between a flying cigar and a flying pencil!'

(We call our jolly Wellingtons 'flying cigars' and we call your nasty Dorniers 'flying pencils'. Have fun translating, Miss E.)

The pilot had been as scared as Maddie, but he was not shaking.

Joan put a comforting arm round Maddie's shoulders and advised her in a whisper to pay no attention to the pilot's language. Maddie gave an uncertain and forced laugh.

'Wasn't even sitting in the gun turret,' she muttered. 'Thank goodness *I'm* not flying into Europe.'

*Signals Branch*

'Flight Lieutenant Mottram has been singing your praises,' Maddie's WAAF Section Officer told her. 'He says you've got the sharpest pair of eyes at Oakway –' (the Section Officer rolled her own eyes) '– probably a bit of an exaggeration, but he said that in flight you're always the first to spot another aircraft approaching. How do you fancy further training?'

'In what?'

The Section Officer coughed apologetically. 'It's a bit secret. Well: very secret. Say yes, and I'll send you on the course.'

'Yes,' Maddie said.

—

To clarify a remark someone made earlier, I confess that I am making up all the proper nouns. Did you think I remembered all the names and ranks of everybody Maddie ever worked with? Or every plane she ever flew in? I think it is more interesting this way.

That is all I can usefully write today, though I would keep on blethering about nothing if I thought that by doing it I could avoid the next few hours' cross-examination – Engel struggling over my handwriting and von Linden picking holes in everything I've said. It must be done . . . no point in putting it off. I have a blanket to look forward to afterwards, I hope, perhaps a tepid dish of *kailkenny à la guerre* – that is, cabbage and potato mash without the potato and with not very much cabbage. I have not got scurvy yet anyway, thanks to France's infinite supply of prison cabbage. Heigh ho –

Ormaie 10.XI.43 JB-S

RAF WAAF RDF Y

S.O.B. S.O.E.

Asst S/O Flt Off

w/op

clk/sd

*m'aidez m'aidez mayday*

*Coastal Defence*

Actually I am afraid to write this.

I don't know why I think it matters. The Battle of Britain is over. Hitler's planned invasion, Operation Sea Lion, failed three years ago. And soon he will be fighting a desperate war on two fronts, with the Americans behind us and the Russians closing in on Berlin from the east, and organised

Resistance in all the countries in the middle. I can't believe his advisers don't already know what went on in the makeshift huts of iron and concrete up and down the south-east coast of England in the summer of 1940 – in a general sense at any rate.

Only I don't really want to go down in history as the one who gave out the details.

RDF is Range and Direction Finding. Same acronym as Radio Direction Finding, to confuse the enemy, but not exactly the same thing. As you know. Well. They call it Radar now, an American word, an acronym of *R*adio *D*etection *A*nd *R*anging, which I do not think is easier to remember. In the summer of 1940 it was still so new nobody knew what it was, and so secret that

*Buckets of blood* – I can't do this.

—

I have spent a vexing half-hour scrapping with Fräulein Engel over the pen nib, which I swear I did not bend on purpose the first time. It is true that it spared me having to continue for a good long while but it did not move things along for that harpy to straighten it out against my teeth when I could have easily done it myself against the table. It is also true that it was stupid of me to bend it out of shape again, on purpose, the second she handed it back to me. Then she had to show me SEVERAL TIMES how, when she was at school, the nurse would use a pen nib to make a pinprick for a blood test.

I don't know why I bent the stupid thing again. It is so easy to wind Miss Engel up. She always wins; but only because my ankles are tied to my chair.

Well, and also because at the end of every argument she reminds me of the deal I made with a certain officer of the Gestapo, and I collapse.

'Hauptsturmführer von Linden is busy, as you know, and will not wish to be interrupted. But I have been told to summon him if necessary. You have been given pen and paper by his judgement of your willingness to cooperate with him, and if you will not write out the confession you have agreed he will have no choice but to resume your interrogation.'

JUST SHUT UP, ANNA ENGEL. I KNOW.

I will do anything: she has only to mention his name and I remember now, I will do anything, *anything*, to avoid him interrogating me again.

So. Range and Direction Finding. Coastal Defence. Do I get my thirty pieces of silver? No, just some more of this hotel stationery. It is very nice to write on.

*Coastal Defence, the unabridged version*

We saw it coming – someone saw it coming. We were that little bit ahead of you and you didn't realise it. You didn't realise how advanced the RDF system was already, or how quickly we were training people to use it, or how far we could see with it. You didn't even realise how quickly we were building new planes of our own. It is true we were outnumbered, but with RDF we saw you coming – saw the swarms of Luftwaffe aircraft even as they were leaving their bases in Occupied France, worked out how high they were flying, saw how many of them were making the raid. And that gave us time to rally. We could meet you in the air, beat you back, keep you from landing, distract you till your fuel ran out and you turned tail until the next wave. Our besieged island, alone on the edge of Europe.

Maddie was sworn to secrecy on the life of her unborn children. It's so secret they don't give you a title when you have anything to do with Radar; you're just called a 'special duties clerk'. Clerk, Special Duties, clk/sd for short, like w/op is for Wireless Operator and Y for wireless. Clk/sd, that's possibly the most useful and damning piece of information I've given you. Now you know.

Maddie spent six weeks in Radar training. She was also given a very nice promotion and made an officer. Then she was posted to RAF Maidens, an operational base for a squadron of new Spitfire fighter planes, not far from Canterbury, near the Kentish coast. It was the furthest she had ever been from home. Maddie was not actually put to work at a Radar screen in one of the direction finding stations, though Maidens did have one; she was still in the radio room. In the fire and fury of the summer of 1940 Maddie sat in a tower of iron and concrete taking bearings over the telephone. The

other RDF girls did the ID work on the glass screens with the blinking green lights, and wired or telephoned it to Operations; then when Operations identified approaching aircraft for her, Maddie answered air-to-ground radio calls as the aircraft came limping home. Or sometimes roaring home in triumph, or newly delivered from the maintenance depot at Swi

SWINLEY SWINLEY

At *Swinley*. Thibaut has made me finish writing the name. I am so ashamed of myself I want to be sick again.

Engel says impatiently not to bother about the name of the workshop. There have been repeated attempts to bomb it to bits and it's not really a secret. Engel is sure our Hauptsturmführer will be more interested in my sample description of the early Radar network. She is cross with T. now for interrupting.

I hate them both. Hate them all.

I HATE THEM

*Coastal Defence, damn it.*

Snivelling IDIOT.

So. So, on the RDF screen you'd see a green dot for an aircraft, one or two, moving across the screen. It might be ours. You'd watch a battle building, the dots multiplying – more joining the first as the pulsing light swept the screen. They'd come together and some of them would go out, like the cinders of sparklers. And every green flash that disappeared was a life finished, one man for a fighter, a whole crew for a bomber. *Out, out, brief candle.* (That is from *Macbeth*. He is said to be another of my unlikely ancestors, and actually did hold court on my family's estate from time to time. He was not, by all contemporary Scottish accounts, the treacherous bastard Shakespeare makes him out to be. Will history remember me for my MBE, my British Empire honour for 'chivalry', or for my cooperation with the Gestapo? I don't want to think about it. I expect they can take the MBE away if you stop being chivalrous.)

If they were radio equipped Maddie could talk to the planes the special duties clerks saw on their screens. She'd tell the pilots more or less what she'd have told them back at Oakway, except she didn't know landmarks so well in Kent. She'd pass bearings to the moving aircraft, along with wind speed and whether or not there were holes in the runway today (sometimes we got raided). Or she'd tell other planes to give priority to the one that had lost its flaps, or whose pilot had a lump of shrapnel lodged in his shoulder, or something like that.

Maddie was listening for incoming stragglers one afternoon following a battle that hadn't involved the Maidsend Squadron. She nearly fell off her chair when she heard the desperate call that came in on her frequency.

'Mayday – mayday –'

– Recognisable in English. Or perhaps that was French, 'M'aidez', help me. The rest of the transmission was in German.

The voice was a boy's voice, young and scared. He broke off each call with a sob. Maddie swallowed – she had no idea where the anguished cries for help were coming from. Maddie called out, 'Listen – listen!' and switched her headset on to the Tannoy so that everyone could hear, and then she grabbed the telephone.

'It's Assistant Section Officer Brodatt in the Tower. Can I get directly through to Jenny in Special Duties? All right, Tessa then. Anyone with a screen – going. I need an ident on a radio call –'

Everyone crowded round the telephone, reading over Maddie's shoulder as she took notes from the direction finding station, then gasping aloud as the meaning of her notes sank in.

'Heading straight for Maidsend!'

'What if it's a bomber?'

'What if it's still loaded?'

'What if it's a hoax?'

‘He’d be calling in English if it was a hoax!’

‘Anyone speak German?’ shouted the officer in charge of the radio room. Silence.

‘Christ! Brodatt, stay on the ’phone. Davenport, you run to the wireless station, perhaps one of those girls can help. Get me a German-speaker! *Now!*’

Maddie listened with her heart in her mouth, holding her headset to one ear and the telephone to the other, waiting for the girl at the RDF screen to pass her new information.

‘Shhh,’ warned the radio officer, leaning over Maddie’s shoulder and taking hold of the telephone receiver for her so her right hand was freed up for taking notes. ‘Don’t say anything – don’t let him know who’s listening –’

The door to the radio room banged open and the subordinate Davenport was back, with one of the WAAF wireless operators hard on his heels. Maddie looked up.

The girl was immaculate – not a blue thread out of place, her chignon of long fair hair coiled in regulation neatness two inches above her uniform collar. Maddie recognised her from the canteen and rare social evenings. Queenie, people called her, though she was not the official WAAF Queen Bee (that’s what we call the senior administrative officer on the base), nor was it her name. Maddie did not know her real name. Queenie had acquired a certain reputation for being fast and fearless; she sauced superior officers and got away with it, but equally she wouldn’t leave a building during an air raid until she’d made sure everyone else was out. Distantly connected to royalty, she was of some rank herself, of privilege rather than experience, a Flight Officer; but she was said to work as diligently at her wireless set as any self-made shop girl. She was pretty, petite and light on her feet, and if there was a Squadron dance on a Saturday night she was the one the pilots went for.

‘Let’s have your headset, Brodatt,’ said the radio officer. Maddie uncurled the gripping earphones and microphone and passed her headset to the pretty little blonde wireless operator, who adjusted the phones to fit her head.

After a few seconds, Queenie said, ‘He says he’s over the English Channel. He’s looking for Calais.’

‘But Tessa says he’s approaching the coast at Whitstable!’

‘He’s in a Heinkel bomber and his crew’s been killed and he’s lost an engine and he wants to land at Calais.’

They all stared at the wireless operator.

‘You sure we’re all talking about the same aircraft?’ the radio officer asked dubiously.

‘Tessa,’ Maddie said into the telephone, ‘could the German plane be over the Channel?’

Now the whole room held its breath, waiting for Tessa’s disembodied reply as, somewhere underneath the chalk cliffs, she sat staring at the green flashes on her screen. Her answer appeared beneath Maddie’s scribbling pencil: *Hostile ident, track 187 Maidsend 25 miles, est height 8,500 ft.*

‘Why the hell does he think he’s over the English Channel?’

‘Oh!’ Maddie gave a sudden gasp of understanding and waved at the enormous map of south-east England and north-west France and the Low Countries that covered the wall behind her radio. ‘Look, look – he’s come from Suffolk. He’s been bombing the coastal bases there. He crossed the mouth of the Thames at its widest point and he thinks he crossed the *Channel!* He’s heading straight for Kent and he thinks it’s France!’

The chief radio officer gave the wireless operator a command.

‘Answer him.’

‘You’ll have to tell me the protocol, sir.’

‘Brodatt, give her the correct protocol.’

Maddie swallowed. There wasn’t really any time to hesitate. She said, ‘What did he say he’s flying? What kind of aircraft? His bomber?’

The wireless operator said the name in German first and they all looked at her blankly. ‘He-111?’ she translated hesitantly.

‘Heinkel He-111 – Any other ID?’

‘A Heinkel He-111. He didn’t say.’

‘Just repeat back to him the type of his aircraft, Heinkel He-111. That’s an open reply. You press this button before you talk, keep it pressed while you’re talking or he won’t be able to hear you. Then let go when you’re done or he won’t be able to reply.’

The chief radio officer clarified, “‘Heinkel He-111, this is Marck de Calais, Calais.” Tell him we are Marck de Calais.’

Maddie listened as the wireless operator made her first radio call, in German, as cool and crisp as if she’d been giving radio instructions to Luftwaffe bombers all her life. The Luftwaffe boy’s voice responded in a gasp of gratitude, practically weeping with relief.

The wireless operator turned to Maddie.

‘He wants bearings for landing.’

‘Tell him this –’ Maddie scribbled numbers and distances on her notepad. ‘Say his ID first, then yours. “Heinkel He-111, this is Calais.” Then runway, wind speed, visibility –’ She scribbled notes furiously. The wireless operator stared at the coded abbreviations, then spoke into the headset, giving orders in German with confident calm.

She paused mid-flow and jabbed a perfectly manicured fingernail into the script Maddie had passed to her. She mouthed silently, R27?

‘Runway 27,’ Maddie said under her breath. ‘Say “Cleared straight in, Runway 27.” Tell him to dump his leftover bombs in the sea if he’s got any, so he doesn’t set them off when he lands.’

The whole of the radio room was silent, mesmerised by the sharp, precisely spoken and incomprehensible instructions that the elegant wireless operator rapped out with the careless authority of a headmistress; and the anguished, equally incomprehensible gasped answers of the boy in the ruined plane; and Maddie scribbling directions, and the protocol for giving them, on the diminishing notepad.

‘Here she comes!’ breathed the chief radio officer, and everybody excepting Maddie and the wireless operator – whose heads were tied to the telephone and the radio headset – went running to the long window to watch the Heinkel bomber limping into view.

‘When he calls final approach, just pass him the wind speed,’ Maddie instructed, scribbling furiously. ‘Eight knots west-south-west, gusting to twelve.’

‘Tell him the fire service is on its way to meet him,’ said the radio officer. He clapped one of the other radio operators on the shoulder. ‘Get the engines out there. And an ambulance.’

The black silhouette in the distance grew larger. Then they could hear it, coughing and whining on its single belaboured engine.

‘Christ! He hasn’t got the undercarriage down,’ gasped the young flying officer called Davenport. ‘This is going to be one hell of a prang.’

But it wasn’t. The Heinkel pancaked in neatly on its belly in a shower of grass and turf and came to rest right in front of the control tower, with the fire engines and pumps and an ambulance screaming up to meet it.

Everyone at the window went pelting down the stairs and out to the runway.

Maddie put her headset back on. The two other radio operators were on their feet at the window. Maddie strained to hear what was going on and heard only sirens. Away from the window she could see sky and the windsock at the end of the runway, but not anything immediately below her. A thin thread of curling black smoke drifted up past the window.

Outside at the edge of the runway, Queenie or whatever her name was stood staring at the wreck of the Luftwaffe bomber.

Floundering on its belly, it was like a vast metallic whale spouting smoke instead of seawater. The wireless operator could see, through the shattered Plexiglas of the cockpit, the young pilot desperately trying to free his dead navigator from a torn and bloody helmet. She watched as a swarm

of fitters and the fire service team closed in to lift the pilot and the rest of his lifeless crew out of the plane. And she saw the frank relief on the pilot's face turn to bewilderment and apprehension as he was increasingly surrounded by blue uniforms and the stripes and badges of the Royal Air Force.

The chief radio officer at her shoulder tut-tutted under his breath.

'Poor young Jerry bastard,' he intoned. 'He won't go home a hero, will he! Must have no sense of direction whatsoever.'

He put a kind hand lightly on the German-speaking wireless operator's shoulder.

'If you don't mind,' he said apologetically, 'we could use your help questioning him.'

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Maddie was going off duty by the time the ambulance men had finished hurriedly patching up the German pilot and brought him into the ground floor office of the control tower. She caught a glimpse of the dazed young man sipping gingerly at a steaming mug while an orderly lit a cigarette for him. They had wrapped him in a blanket, and it was August, but his teeth were still chattering. The pretty blonde wireless operator was perched on the edge of a hard chair at the other side of the room, politely looking away from this shattered and grief-stricken enemy. She was smoking a cigarette of her own as she waited to be given further instruction. She looked just as poised and calm as she had been when she took the headset from Maddie in the radio room, but Maddie could see her casually drilling the back of her chair with one restless, manicured forefinger.

I couldn't have done what she just did, Maddie thought. We'd not have made this catch without her. Never mind speaking German; I couldn't have *faked* it like that, just off the top of my head, no training or anything. Not sure I could manage what she's going to have to do next either. Thank goodness *I* don't speak German.

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That night Malsend was raided again. It wasn't anything to do with the captured Heinkel bomber, it was just an ordinary air raid, the Luftwaffe doing their worst to try to destroy British defences. The RAF officers' quarters were blown up (no officers in it at the time), and great big holes gouged out of the runways. The WAAF officers were quartered in the gatehouse lodge at the edge of the estate grounds that the airfield had been built on, and Maddie and her bunkmates were so dead asleep they didn't hear the sirens. They only woke up after the first explosion. They ran through scrub woodland to the nearest shelter in their pyjamas and tin hats, clutching gas masks and ID cards. There was no light to see by except the gunfire and the exploding flames – no street lamps, no cracks of light in any doors or windows, not even the glow of a cigarette end. It was like being in hell, nothing but shadows and jumping flames and fire and stars overhead.

Maddie had grabbed an umbrella. Gas mask, tin hat, ration coupons and an umbrella. Hellfire raining down on her out of the sky and she held it off with a brolly. No one realised she had it of course, until she was struggling to get it in the door of the air-raid shelter.

'Shut it – shut the damned thing – *leave it!*'

'I'm not leaving it!' Maddie cried, and managed to wrestle the umbrella inside. The girl behind her pushed and one of the girls ahead of her grabbed her by the arm and pulled, and then they were all trembling in the dark underground with the door shut.

A couple of them had had the sense to grab their cigarettes. They passed them around, parsimoniously sharing. There was not a single lad about – the men were quartered half a mile away on the other side of the airfield and used a different shelter – those that weren't scrambling into aircraft to fight back. The girl with the matches found a candle, and they all settled down for the duration.

'Bring us that deck of cards, love, let's have a round of rummy.'

'Rummy! Don't be soft. Poker. We'll play for ciggies. For gosh sakes put that brolly down, Brodatt, are you completely bonkers?'

'No,' Maddie said very calmly.

They were all crouched on the dirt floor round the playing cards and glowing tobacco ends. It was cosy in perhaps the way you'd be cosy in hell. Something flying low was peppering the runway with machine-gun fire; even buried mostly underground, even a quarter of a mile away, the shelter's iron walls shuddered.

'Glad I'm not on shift right now!'

'Pity the poor souls who are.'

'Can I share your umbrella?'

Maddie looked up. Crouched next to her, in the light of the flickering candle and one oil lamp, was the small German-speaking wireless operator. She was a vision of feminine perfection and heroism even in her WAAF regulation issue men's pyjamas, her fair hair tumbling in a loose plait over one shoulder. Everybody else was shedding hairpins; Queenie's hairpins marched in ordered rank on her pyjama pocket and would not go back in her hair till she was back in bed. With her slender, perfectly manicured fingers she offered Maddie her cigarette.

'Wish I'd brought a broolly,' she drawled in the plummy, educated tones of the Oxbridge colleges. 'Super idea! A portable illusion of shelter and safety. Have you room for two?'

Maddie took the cigarette, but did not immediately move over. The fey Queenie, Maddie knew, was given to fits of madness such as stealing malt whisky from the RAF officers' mess, and Maddie was sure that anyone bold enough to impersonate an enemy radio operator on the spur of the moment was entirely capable of mocking someone who burst into tears every time she heard a gun fired. On a military airfield. In a war.

But Queenie didn't seem to be making fun of Maddie – quite the opposite. Maddie budged over a little and made room for another body beneath the umbrella.

'Marvellous!' Queenie cried out happily. 'Like being a tortoise. They ought to make these out of steel. Let me hold it up –'

She gently prised the handle out of Maddie's trembling hand and held the ridiculous umbrella up over both their heads inside the bunker. Maddie took a drag on the offered cigarette. After a while of alternately biting her nails and smoking the borrowed cigarette down to a sliver of paper and ash, her hands stopped trembling. Maddie said hoarsely, 'Thank you.'

'Not a problem,' said Queenie. 'Why don't you play this round? I'll cover you.'

'What were you on Civvie Street then –' Maddie asked casually. 'An actress?'

The little wireless operator dissolved in a fit of gleeful laughter, but still steadfastly held up the umbrella over Maddie's head. 'No, I just like pretending,' she said. 'I do the same thing with our own boys, you know. Flirting's a game. I'm very boring really. I'd be at university if it weren't for the war. I've not quite finished my first year. I started a year early and a term late.'

'Reading what?'

'German. Obviously. They spoke it – well, an odd variant – in the village where I went to school in Switzerland. And I liked it.'

Maddie laughed. 'You were wizard this afternoon. Really brilliant.'

'I couldn't have done it without you telling me what to say. *You* were brilliant too. You were *right there* when I needed you, not a word or call out of place. You made all the decisions. All I had to do was pay attention, and that's what I do all day on the Y sets anyway – just listen and listen. I never have to *do* anything. And all I had to do this afternoon was read from the script you gave me.'

'You had to translate!'

'We did it together,' said her friend.

—

People are complicated. There is so much more to everybody than you realise. You see someone in school every day, or at work, in the canteen, and you share a cigarette or a coffee with them, and you talk about the weather or last night's air raid. But you don't talk so much about what was the nastiest thing you ever said to your mother, or how you pretended to be David Balfour, the hero of

*Kidnapped*, for the whole of the year when you were 13, or what you imagine yourself doing with the pilot who looks like Leslie Howard if you were alone in his bunk after a dance.

No one slept the night of that air raid, or the next day. We had pretty much to resurface the runway ourselves that morning. We weren't equipped for it, we didn't have the tools or the materials, and we weren't a building crew, but without a runway RAF Mairfield was defenceless. And Britain too, in the bigger picture. We repaired the runway.

Everyone mucked in, including the captured German – I think he was rather apprehensive about his fate as a prisoner of war and was just as happy to spend the day stripped to the waist shovelling piles of earth with twenty other pilots than to be moved on to some unknown official internment awaiting him inland. I remember we all had to bow our heads in a moment of silence for his dead companions before we set to work. I don't know what happened to him after that.

In the canteen, Queenie was asleep with her head on the table. She must have done up her hair first, before she came in from two hours' stone-picking on the runway, but she'd fallen asleep before she'd even taken the spoon out of her tea. Maddie sat down across from her with two fresh cups of tea and one iced bun. I don't know where the icing came from. Someone must have been hoarding sugar just in case there was a direct hit on the airfield and everybody needed cheering up. Maddie was quite relieved to see the unflappable wireless operator with her guard down. She pushed the Cup That Cheers close to Queenie's face so that the warmth woke her.

They propped their heads on their elbows, facing each other.

'Are you scared of *anything*?' Maddie asked.

'Lots of things!'

'Name one.'

'I can name ten.'

'Go on then.'

Queenie looked at her hands. 'Breaking my nails,' she said critically. After two hours clearing the runway of rubble and twisted metal, her manicure was in need of repair.

'I'm serious,' said Maddie quietly.

'All right then. Dark.'

'I don't believe you.'

'It's true,' said Queenie. 'Now your turn.'

'Cold,' Maddie answered.

Queenie sipped her tea. 'Falling asleep while I'm working.'

'Me too.' Maddie laughed. 'And bombs dropping.'

'Too easy.'

'All right.' It was Maddie's turn to be defensive. She shook tangled dark curls off her collar; her hair was barely short enough to count as regulation and too short to put up. 'Bombs dropping on my gran and granddad.'

Queenie nodded in agreement. 'Bombs dropping on my favourite brother. Jamie's the youngest of 'em, the nearest me in age. He's a pilot.'

'Not having a useful skill,' said Maddie. 'I don't want to have to marry right away just so I don't have to work down Ladder Mill.'

'You are joking!'

'When the war's over, I *still* won't have a skill. Bet there won't be this desperate need for radio operators when the war ends.'

'You think that'll happen soon?'

'The longer the war goes on,' Maddie said, carefully cutting her iced bun in half with a tin butter knife, 'the older I'll get.'

Queenie let out a giddy, tickled laugh. 'Getting old!' she cried. 'I'm horribly afraid of being old.'

Maddie smiled and handed her half the bun. 'Me too. Bit like being afraid of dying though. Not much you can do about it.'

'What am I up to?'

'You've done four. Not counting the nails. Six to go.'

'All right.' Queenie deliberately tore her bun into six equal pieces and arranged them round the rim of her saucer. Then, one by one, she dunked each piece into her tea, named a fear and ate it.

'Number 5, the Newbery College porter. Blimey, he's a troll. I was a year younger than all the other first years and I'd have been scared of him even if he hadn't hated me. It was because I was reading German and he was sure my tutor was a spy! Five down, right? Number 6, heights, I'm afraid of heights, that's because my big brothers tied me to a drain spout on the roof of our castle when I was five and forgot about me all afternoon. All five of them got a good birching for it too. Seven, ghosts – I mean one ghost, not seven, one particular ghost. I don't need to worry about that here. The ghost is probably why I'm scared of the dark too.'

Queenie washed back these unlikely confessions with more tea. Maddie stared at her in growing amazement. They were still eye to eye across from each other with their chins against their hands and their elbows on the table, and Queenie did not seem to be making it up. She was taking her unlikely inventory very seriously.

'Number 8, Getting Caught Stealing Grapes From the Glasshouse in the Kitchen Garden. That's another birching. Course we're all too old now for birchings *and* for grape-stealing. Number 9, Killing Someone. By accident or on purpose. Did I save that German laddie's life yesterday, or destroy it? You do it too – you tell the fighters where to find them. You're responsible. Do you think about it?'

Maddie didn't answer. She did think about it.

'Perhaps it gets easier after the first time. Number 10, Getting Lost.'

Queenie glanced up from dipping Getting Lost in her tea and looked Maddie in the eye. 'Now, I can see that you are sceptical and disinclined to believe anything I tell you. And perhaps I'm not *really* worried about ghosts. But I *am* afraid of getting lost. I *hate* trying to find my way around this airfield. Every Nissen hut looks the same. My God, there are forty of them! And all the taxiways and aprons seem to change every day. I keep trying to use planes for landmarks and they keep moving them around.'

Maddie laughed. 'I felt sorry for that lost Jerry pilot yesterday,' she said. 'I know I shouldn't. But I've seen so many of our own lads get confused, their first flight over the Pennines. Seems it shouldn't be possible to confuse England and France. But who knows what you're thinking when all your mates have been blown to smithereens and you're flying a broken plane. Perhaps it was his first flight to England. I felt dead sorry for him.'

'Yes, I did too,' said Queenie softly, and swallowed the last of her tea as if she were throwing back a dram of whisky.

'Was it beastly awful, questioning him?'

Queenie gave her an enigmatic little squint. "Careless talk costs lives." I've taken an oath not to tell about it.'

'Oh!' Maddie went red. 'Of course not. Sorry.'

The wireless operator sat up straight. She looked at her ruined nails and shrugged, and patted her hair to make sure it was still in place. Then she stood up and stretched and yawned. 'Thanks for sharing your bun,' she said, smiling.

'Thanks for sharing your fears!'

'You still owe me a few.'

The air-raid siren went.

Ormaie 11.XI.43 JB-S

*Not Part of the Story*

I must record last night's debriefing because it was so funny.

Engel flapped down my sheaf of scribbled-on hotel stationery in frustration and said to von Linden, ‘She must be commanded to write of the meeting between Brodatt and herself. This description of early Radar operations is irrelevant nonsense.’

Von Linden made a sound like a very soft puff of air, like blowing out a candle. Engel and I both stared at him as though he’d suddenly sprouted horns. (It was a laugh. He didn’t crack a smile, I think his face is made of plaster of Paris, but he definitely laughed.)

‘Fräulein Engel, you are not a student of literature,’ he said. ‘The English Flight Officer has studied the craft of the novel. She is making use of suspense and foreshadowing.’

Golly, Engel stared at him. I of course took the opportunity to interpose wi’ pig-headed Wallace pride, ‘I am not *English*, you ignorant Jerry bastard, I am a SCOT.’

Engel dutifully slapped me into silence and said, ‘She is not writing a novel. She is making a report.’

‘But she is employing the literary conceits and techniques of a novel. And the meeting you speak of has already occurred – you have been reading it for the past quarter of an hour.’

Engel shuffled pages in frenzy, hunting backwards.

‘Do you not recognise her in these pages?’ von Linden prompted. ‘Ah, perhaps not, she flatters herself with competence and bravery which you have never witnessed. She is the young woman called Queenie, the wireless operator who takes down the Luftwaffe aircraft. Our captive English agent –’

*‘Scottish!’*

Slap.

‘Our *prisoner* has not yet elaborated on her own role as a wireless operator at the aerodrome at Maidsend.’

Oh, he’s good. I would never in a million years have guessed that SS-Hauptsturmführer Amadeus von Linden is a ‘student of literature’. Not in a million years.

He wanted to know, then, why I was choosing to write about myself in the third person. Do you know, I had not even noticed I was doing it until he asked.

The simple answer is because I am telling the story from Maddie’s point of view, and it would be awkward to introduce another viewpoint character at this point. It is much easier writing about me in the third person than it would be if I tried to tell the story from my own point of view. I can avoid all my old thoughts and feelings. It’s a superficial way to write about myself. I don’t have to take myself seriously – or, well, only as seriously as Maddie takes me.

But as von Linden pointed out, I have not even used my own name, which is what confused Engel.

I suppose the real answer is that I am not Queenie any more. I just want to *thump my old self in the face* when I think about her, so earnest and self-righteous and flamboyantly heroic. I am sure other people did too.

I am someone else now.

They *did* used to call me Queenie though. Everybody had stupid nicknames made up for them (like being at school, remember?). I was Scottie, sometimes, but more often Queenie. That was because Mary, Queen of Scots, is another of my illustrious ancestors. She died messily as well. They all died messily.

I am going to run out of stationery today. They have given me a Jewish prescription pad to use until they find something more sensible. I did not know such things existed. The forms have got the doctor’s name, Benjamin Zylberberg, at the top, and a yellow star with a warning stamped at the bottom, stating that this Jewish doctor can only legally prescribe medication to other Jews. Presumably he is no longer practising (presumably he has been shipped off to break rocks in a concentration camp somewhere), which is why his blank prescriptions have fallen into the hands of the Gestapo.

*Prescription Forms!*

<p><i>Nom: Anna Engel</i></p> <p><i>Adresse: Fräulein Engel is the required form. I sometimes use 'On Duty Female Guard Mein Führer SIR' to wind her up.</i></p>	<p><i>Date: Not believed ever to have dated. Does she have a sweetheart? Husband? ... She wears no jewellery. (v.L. has a gold signet with a tiny sapphire in it.)</i></p>
<p><i>Rx Needs a damned good shagging. She may choose among the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>Maquis guerrilla</i></li><li><i>Gestapo</i></li><li><i>Résistance</i></li><li><i>German army</i></li><li><i>French Milice police</i></li><li><i>Civilian</i></li></ul>	
<p><i>Médecin Dr Sigmund Freud (Not Dr Zylberberg but still appropriately Jewish)</i></p>	<p><i>Rép Nightly, 4 or 5 fois</i></p>

I've done her a nicer one, as well.

<p><i>Nom: Anna Engel</i></p> <p><i>Adresse:</i></p>	<p><i>Date: Still looking</i></p>
<p><i>Rx</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>1 cigarette in ivory holder</i></li> <li>✓ <i>1 magnum champagne (one normal bottle would not be enough to loosen her up)</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Chanel cocktail dress. RED is Engel's colour</i></li> <li>✓ <i>A table at the Hôtel Ritz Paris, if the Nazis ever clear out of it. Why are they so fond of ruining perfectly nice hotels?</i></li> </ul>	
<p><i>Médecin</i></p>	<p><i>Rép As needed</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>fois</i></span></p>

I meant to give her a Night Out, but when I picture this scenario, it makes me think of Mata Hari on a mission. Would Engel be happier as a spy, glamorous and deadly? I just can't imagine her in any role other than Beasty Punctilious Official. Also I can't say that the bleak aftermath of a Special Agent's *unsuccessful* mission has anything to recommend it.

I was going to do prescriptions for William Wallace and Mary Queen of Scots, and Adolf Hitler too, but I can't think of anything clever enough to make it worth the reprisals for the waste of paper.

Coffee would be at the top of my own prescription list. Then aspirin. I am running a fever. It won't be tetanus, as they inoculated us, but may be septicaemia; I don't think those pins were very clean. There was one I missed for a while after I pulled the others out, and the spot is very sore now (I

am a little worried about some of the burns too, which chafe when my wrist hits the table as I write). Perhaps I will die quietly of blood poisoning and avoid the kerosene treatment.

There's no efficient way to kill yourself with a dressmaker's pin (I wouldn't call contracting gangrene an efficient way to kill yourself) – I puzzled over it for a long time, seeing as they'd left the pins there, but it's just not possible. Useful for picking locks though. I so loved the burglary lessons we got when we were training. Didn't so much enjoy the bleak aftermath of my unsuccessful attempt to put them to use – very good at picking locks but not so good at getting out of the building. Our prison cells are only hotel bedrooms, but we are guarded like royalty. And also, there are dogs. After that episode with the pins, they had a good go at making sure I wouldn't be able to walk if I did manage to get out – don't know where you pick up the skills for disabling a person without actually breaking her legs, Nazi School of Assault and Battery? Like everything else it wasn't permanent damage, nothing left this week but the bruises, and they check me carefully now for stray bits of metal. I got caught yesterday trying to hide a pen nib in my hair (I didn't have a plan for it, but you never know).

Oh – often I forget I am not writing this for myself, and then it's too late to scratch it out. The evil Engel always snatches everything away from me and raises an alarm if she sees me trying to retract anything. Yesterday I tried ripping off the bottom of the page and eating it, but she got to it first. (It was when I realised I had thoughtlessly mentioned the factory at Swinley. It is refreshing sometimes to fight with her. She has the advantage of freedom, but I am a lot more imaginative. Also I am willing to use my teeth which she is squeamish about.)

Where was I? Hauptsturmführer von Linden has taken away everything I wrote yesterday. It is your own fault, you cold and soulless Jerry bastard, if I repeat myself.

Miss Engel has reminded me. 'The air-raid siren went.' Clever girl, she has been paying attention.

She makes me give her every page to read now as soon as I have finished with it. We had fun doing the prescriptions. Will it get her in trouble if I mention that she burned a few *herself* to get rid of them this time? That'll teach you to try to make a chum of me, On-Duty-Female-Guard Engel.

I have already got her in trouble, without knowing I was doing it, by mentioning her cigarettes. She is not allowed to smoke while she is on duty. Apparently Adolf Hitler has a vendetta against tobacco, finds it filthy and disgusting, and his military police and their assistants are not meant to smoke at work. I don't think this is too strictly enforced except when the place is run by an obsessive martinet like Amadeus von Linden. Shame for him really, as a lit cigarette is such a convenient accessory if your job happens to be Extracting Information from Enemy Intelligence Agents.

As long as Engel's crimes are all so minor, they won't get rid of her because her combined talents would be quite difficult to replace (a bit like mine). But her offences do consistently fall under 'insubordination'.

#### *Anti-Aircraft Gunner*

The air-raid siren went. Every head in the room looked up in dismay and exhaustion at the canteen's pasteboard ceiling, as if they could see through it. Then everybody rocketed from their borrowed church hall wooden folding chairs to meet the next battle.

Maddie stood facing her new friend by the table they had just abandoned, people around her whirling into action. She felt as though she were at the eye of a tropical storm. The still point of the turning world.

'Come on!' Queenie cried, just like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*, and grabbed Maddie by the arm to pull her outside. 'You go on duty at one, what have you got –' she glanced at her watch '– an hour? Quick nap in the shelter before they need you in the radio room – pity you haven't brought your brolly along. Come on, I'll go with you.'

The pilots were already racing for the Spitfires, and Maddie tried to fix her mind on the practical problem of how best to take off from the half-mended runway – taxiing would be the hardest, as you wouldn't be able to see the holes in the surface past the high nose of the little fighter planes.

She tried not to think about what it would be like running across the airfield to the radio room an hour from now, under fire.

But she did it. Because you do. It is incredible what you do, knowing you have to. A bit less than an hour later – to allow themselves some extra time for dodging bombs – the two girls were outside again, in the moonscape that was now RAF Maidsend.

Queenie steered Maddie at a trot, both of them bent nearly double, hugging the sides of buildings and zigzagging across the open spaces. They'd heard how during the retreat from France the low-flying planes of the Luftwaffe would strafe people on the ground with machine-gun fire, just for the hell of it, and right now there were two or three German fighters buzzing low over the runway like wasps with the sun on their wings, drilling holes in windows and parked aircraft.

'Over here! Here!' someone yelled desperately. 'Hey, you two, come and help here!'

For a few seconds Maddie, doggedly coping with her own private hell of rational or irrational fear, did not even notice Queenie's change of direction as she headed towards the cry for help. Then sense came back to Maddie for a minute and she realised that Queenie was dragging her to the nearest anti-aircraft gun emplacement.

Or what was left of it. Most of the protective concrete barrier and the sandbags surrounding it had been blown to bits, taking with it two of the Army gunners who had been valiantly trying to keep the runway fit for the Spitfire squadron who would have to land there after the battle. One of the dead gunners was easily younger than Maddie. A third man who was still standing looked like a butcher, without the apron, soaked from neck to thighs in blood. He turned wearily and said, 'Thanks for the relief. I'm beat.' Then he sat down on the ruined platform and closed his eyes. Maddie covered next to him, her arms over her head, listening to the hideous rattle of the gunner sucking air into blood-filled lungs. Queenie slapped her.

'Get up, girl!' she ordered. 'I won't have this. I'm your superior officer giving orders now. Get up, Brodatt. If you're scared *do something*. See if you can make this gun work. Get moving!'

'The shell needs loading first,' the gunner whispered, lifting a finger to point. 'The Prime Minister don't like girls firing guns.'

'Bother the Prime Minister!' exclaimed the superior officer. 'Load the damned gun, Brodatt.'

Maddie, nothing if not mechanically minded and trained to react positively to orders from people in authority, clawed her way up the gun.

'That slip of a lass'll never shift that shell,' croaked the gunner. 'Weighs 30 pounds, that does.'

Maddie wasn't listening. She was reckoning. After a minute's rational thought and with strength that she later couldn't explain, she loaded the shell.

Queenie worked frantically over the fallen gunner trying to plug the holes in his chest and stomach. Maddie did not watch. After some time Queenie took her by the shoulders and showed her how to aim.

'You've got to anticipate – it's like shooting birds, you have to fire a little ahead of where they'll be next –'

'Shoot a lot of birds, do you?' Maddie gasped, anger and fear making her peevish about the other girl's seemingly limitless talents.

'I was born in the middle of a grouse moor on the opening day of the shooting season! I could fire a gun before I could read! But this poxy thing is just a wee bit bigger than a Diana air rifle, and I don't know how it works, so we have to do it together. Like yesterday, all right?' She gave a sudden gasp and asked anxiously, 'That's not one of our planes, is it?'

'Can't you tell?'

'Not really.'

Maddie relented.

'It's a Messerschmitt 109.'

‘Well, clobber it! Point this way – now wait till he comes back, he doesn’t know this station’s still operational – just wait.’

Maddie waited. Queenie was right: doing something, focusing, took away the fear.

‘Now go!’

The blast momentarily blinded them both. They did not see what happened. Maddie swore, afterwards, that the plane did not go down in a ball of flame until it had made at least two more passes over the runway. But no one else ever claimed to have shot down that Me-109 (oh, how many aircraft I know after all!), and God knows the fighter pilots were a competitive lot of bean counters. So that kill – I expect the Luftwaffe also call it a kill when someone shoots down a plane, like deer – was credited to two off-duty WAAF officers working together at an unmanned gun station.

‘I don’t think our gun did that,’ Maddie told her friend, whey-faced, as the black, oily smoke rose from the turnip field where the plane had come down. ‘It must have been one of our lot, firing from the air. And if it *was* this gun, it wasn’t you.’

It was bad enough she suspected the reason Queenie was at her side now was because she’d had to give up on the lad whose gun they’d taken over. Bad enough. But there had also been a pilot in that ball of flame, a living young man with not much more training than Maddie herself.

‘Stay here,’ Queenie choked. ‘Can you load another shell? I’ll find someone who knows what they’re doing to take over – you’ll be needed in the Tower now –’

Queenie paused a moment.

‘Which way to the north-east air-raid shelter from here?’ she asked anxiously. ‘I get so muddled in the smoke.’

Maddie pointed. ‘Straight line across the grass. Easy peasy if you’re brave enough – like finding Neverland, “Second to the right, and then straight on till morning.”’

‘What about you? Brave enough?’

‘I’ll be all right. Now I’ve got something to do –’

They both ducked instinctively as something exploded at the other end of the runway. Queenie squeezed Maddie round the waist and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Kiss me, Hardy!” Weren’t those Nelson’s last words at the Battle of Trafalgar? Don’t cry. We’re still alive and we make a *sensational* team.’

Then she hitched up her hair to its two-inch above the collar regulation point, swabbed her own tears and the grease and the concrete dust and the gunner’s blood from her cheeks with the back of her hand, and she was off running again, like the Red Queen.

It’s like being in love, discovering your best friend.

‘Get your mac on,’ Maddie said, ‘I’m going to teach you to navigate.’

Queenie burst out laughing. ‘Impossible!’

‘Not impossible! There’s a couple of pilots here who scrapped their way out of Poland after it was invaded. They got here with no maps, no *food*, no language other than Polish. They’ll tell you all about it if you let them – bit tricky making sense of their English. Anyway if a couple of escaped prisoners can find their way across Europe and become RAF pilots, you can –’

‘You *talk* to the pilots?’ Queenie interrupted with interest.

‘There are other things you can do besides dance with them.’

‘Yes, but *talking*! How unimaginative.’

‘Some of them won’t dance, you know, so you have to talk. That vicar’s boy won’t dance. Hard to get him to talk either – but they all like jawing about maps. Or lack of maps. Come on, you don’t need a map. We’ve got the whole day. As long as we don’t go anywhere more than five miles away, so I can get back sharpish if the weather clears. But *look* at it –’ Maddie waved at the window. It was pouring, rain coming down in sheets, a gale blowing.

‘Just like home,’ Queenie said happily. ‘You don’t get proper Scotch Mist in Switzerland.’

Maddie snorted. Queenie was devoted to careless name-dropping, scattering the details of her privileged upbringing without the faintest hint of modesty or embarrassment (though after a while Maddie began to realise she only did it with people she liked or people she detested – those who didn't mind and those she didn't care about – anyone in between, or who might have been offended, she was more cautious with).

'I've got bicycles,' Maddie said. 'A couple of the mechanics let me borrow them. Rain doesn't stop those lads working.'

'Where are we going?'

'The Green Man. Pub at the foot of the cliffs on St Catherine's Bay, last chance before it shuts down next week. The proprietor's fed up being fired at. Not by the Germans, mind you, it's our own lads drilling the pub sign out there on the edge of the shingle, last thing before they head home after a battle – they do it for luck!'

'Bet they do it to get rid of unused ammunition.'

'Well, it's a landmark, and you're the navigator. Find the coast and go south, easy peasy! You can use my compass. If you *can't* find it I'm afraid it'll be nowt but cold beans straight from the tin for your dinner –'

'That's not fair! I'm back on shift at eleven tonight!'

Maddie rolled her eyes. 'Bloomin' 'eck, that leaves us only about fifteen hours for a ten-mile pushbike ride! But it'll give me a chance to finish telling you my fears.' Maddie had her man's greatcoat on and was tying it up round her ankles so it wouldn't catch in the bicycle chain.

'I hope you've got a tin-opener,' Queenie said ominously, struggling into her own greatcoat, 'and a spoon.'

It was astonishing, after ten minutes' pedalling away from RAF Maidensend, how peaceful the drenched Kent countryside was. It was true that every now and then you passed a concrete gun emplacement or watchtower, but mostly you were just travelling through rolling, chalky fields, green with turnips and potatoes and mile upon mile of orchards.

'You might have brought your broolly,' Queenie said.

'I'm saving it for the next air raid.'

They came to a crossroads. There were no road signs, not one; they'd all been taken down or blacked over to confuse the enemy in the event Operation Sea Lion was successful and the German army came swarming inland. 'I've no *idea* where we are,' Queenie wailed. The mechanic's bike was so big for her that she couldn't sit down on it; she had to stand on the pedals. She seemed in perpetual danger of falling off, or of being devoured by her enormous overcoat. She had the outraged, distraught look of a wet cat.

'Use the compass. Keep going east till you find the sea. Pretend,' Maddie told her, inspired – 'Pretend you're a *German spy*. You've been dropped here by parachute. You've got to find your contact, who's at this legendary smugglers' pub by the sea, and if anyone catches you –'

Under her dripping plastic rain hat, the kind you get in a tiny cardboard box with a flower on it for a halfpenny, Queenie gave Maddie a strange look. It had challenge in it, and defiance, and excitement. But also *enlightenment*. Queenie leaned forward over the handlebars of her bicycle and was off, pedalling like fury.

At the crest of a low rise she bounded off her bike in one almighty leap like a roe deer away up the glens, and was halfway up a tree before Maddie realised what she was doing.

'Get down, you daft idiot! You'll be soaked! You're *in uniform!*'

'Von hier aus kann ich das Meer sehen,' said Queenie, which is 'I can see the sea from here' in German. (Oh – silly me. Of course it is.)

'Shut up! You lunatic!' Maddie scolded furiously. 'What are you *doing?*'

'Ich bin eine Agentin der Nazis.' Queenie pointed. 'Zum Meer geht es da lang.'

'*You'll get us both shot!*'

Queenie considered. She looked at the teeming sky, looked at the endless dripping apple orchard and looked at the empty road. Then she shrugged and said in English, ‘Don’t think so.’

“*Careless talk costs lives,*” Maddie quoted.

Queenie laughed so hard she slid gracelessly and painfully from one branch to a lower branch, and tore her coat climbing down. ‘Now just you be quiet, Maddie Brodatt. You told me to be a Nazi spy and I’m being one. I won’t let you get shot.’

(I really would like to catapult myself back there in time and kick my own teeth in.)

The outbound route to St Catherine’s Bay was, shall we say, *creative*. It involved Queenie getting off her bicycle at every single crossroads – each one wet, windy and featureless – and climbing a wall or gate or tree to get her bearings. Then there was always a palaver with the greatcoat as she got going again, and near misses with puddles.

‘You know what I’m scared of?’ Maddie yelled at the top of her voice, rain and east wind beating in her face as she pedalled energetically to keep up with the small wireless operator. ‘Cold tinned beans! It’s quarter to two. The pub’ll be shut by the time we get there.’

‘You said it doesn’t shut till next week.’

‘For the afternoon, you gormless halfwit! They stop serving till evening!’

‘I think that’s frightfully unfair of you, blaming it on me,’ Queenie said. ‘It’s your game. I’m just playing along.’

‘Another thing I’m scared of,’ Maddie said.

‘That doesn’t count. Neither do the tinned beans. What are you most afraid of – what’s your number one fear?’

‘Court martial,’ answered Maddie briefly.

Queenie, uncharacteristically, was silent. And stayed silent for some time, even while she did another of her tree-climbing surveys of the surrounding area. Finally she asked, ‘Why?’

It had been a good long while since Maddie had given her answer, but Queenie did not need to remind her what the subject had been.

‘I keep *doing* things. I make decisions without thinking. Crikey, firing a ruddy anti-aircraft gun – no authorisation whatsoever, and Messerschmitt 109s circling overhead!’

‘The Messerschmitt 109s circling overhead were the reason you were firing it,’ Queenie pointed out. ‘I authorised you. I’m a Flight Officer.’

‘You’re not *my* Flight Officer and you don’t have any gunnery authority.’

‘What else?’ Queenie asked.

‘Oh – things like guiding in the German pilot the other day. I’ve done something like that before, only in English.’ She told Queenie about talking down the lads in the Wellington, the first time. ‘No one authorised that either. I didn’t get in trouble, but I should have. So stupid. Why did I do it?’

‘Charity?’

‘I could have killed them though.’

‘You *have* to take risks like that. There’s a war on. They could have bought it and gone down in flames themselves, without your help. But with your help they made it down safely.’

Queenie paused. Then she asked, ‘Why are you so *damn good* at it?’

‘At what?’

‘Air navigation.’

‘I’m a pilot,’ Maddie said – you know, she was so matter-of-fact, she wasn’t proud, she wasn’t defensive – just, *I’m a pilot*.

Queenie was outraged.

‘You said you didn’t have any *skills*, you fibber!’

‘I haven’t. I’m only a civil pilot. I haven’t flown for a year. I haven’t got an instructor’s rating. I’ve a good many hours, probably more than most of our lads in the Spitfires; I’ve even flown at night.’

But I'm not using it. When they expand the Air Transport Auxiliary, I'm going to try to join – if the WAAF'll let me go. I'll have to do a course. There's no flight training on for women at the minute.'

Queenie apparently had to turn all this over in her head on her own for a while as she considered the implications of it: Maddie Brodatt, with her unrefined South Manchester accent and her nonsense bike mechanic's approach to problems, was a pilot – with more practical experience than most of the young RAF Maidsend Squadron who were daily and sleeplessly hurling themselves towards flame and death against the Luftwaffe.

'You're dead quiet,' Maddie said.

'Ich habe einen Platten,' Queenie announced.

'Speak English, you lunatic!'

Queenie stopped her bike and climbed off. 'I have a puncture. My tyre's flat.'

Maddie sighed heavily. She propped her own bicycle against the verge and squatted in a puddle to look. Queenie's front tyre was nearly completely flat. The puncture must have happened only seconds before – Maddie could still hear the air hissing out of the inner tube.

'We'd better go back,' she said. 'If we go on we'll have too far to walk. I don't have a repair kit.'

'O faithless one,' Queenie said, pointing to the entrance to a farm lane about twenty yards further on. 'This is my plan to scrounge a meal before I meet my contact.' She sniffed knowingly, nose raised into the wind. 'A provincial farmhouse lies less than a hundred yards away, and I smell meat stew and fruit pie –' She took her wounded bicycle by the handlebars and set off up the lane at a determined pace. Land Army girls were hoeing among the cabbages in the adjoining field – no time off for them in the rain either. They had sacks tied round their legs with string and ground sheets with holes in the middle for rain capes. Maddie and the disguised Nazi spy were well-equipped by comparison in their RAF men's overcoats.

A chorus of vicious dogs began to bark as they approached. Maddie looked round anxiously.

'Don't worry, that's just noise. They'll be tied up or they'd bother the Land Girls. Is the sign up?'

'What sign?'

'A jar of rowan berries in the window – if there's no rowan in the window I won't be welcome.'

Maddie burst out laughing.

'You *are* daft!'

'Is there?'

Maddie was taller than her companion. She stood on tiptoe to see over the barnyard wall, and her mouth dropped open.

'There *is*,' she said, and turned to gape at Queenie. 'How –?'

Queenie leaned her bicycle against the wall, looking very smug. 'You can see the trees over the garden wall. They've just been trimmed. It's all very tidy and pretty in a wifely way, but she'll have dug up her geraniums to plant tatties for the War Effort. So if she has something nice to decorate her kitchen with, like fresh-cut rowan berries, she's likely to do it, *and* –'

Queenie settled her hair into shape beneath the plastic rain bonnet. '*And* she's the sort of person who will feed us.'

She let herself in boldly at the kitchen door of the strange farm.

'Ah've nae wish tae disturb ye, Missus –' Her well-bred, educated accent suddenly developed an irresistible Scottish burr. 'We've come frae RAF Maidsend and Ah've had this wee spot o' bother wi' me bike. Ah wondered –'

'Oh, no trouble at all, love!' the farmer's wife said. 'I've a couple of Land Girls boarding with me, and I'm sure we've got a puncture repair kit among us. Mavis and Grace'll be in the fields just now, but if you wait a moment I'll check the shed – Oh, and for goodness sake come in and warm yourselves first!'

Queenie produced, as if by magic, a tin of 25 Player's from deep in the pockets of her greatcoat. Maddie realised suddenly that this infinite supply of cigarettes was carefully hoarded – realised that

she'd scarcely ever seen Queenie smoking, but that she used cigarettes as gifts or as payment in kind in place of cash – for tips and poker chips and, now, bicycle patches and lunch.

Only once, Maddie remembered now, had she seen Queenie smoking a cigarette she hadn't lit for someone else – only once, when she'd been waiting to interview the German pilot.

Queenie held out the cigarettes.

'Oh, goodness no, that's *far* too much!'

'Aye, take them, let your lassies share 'em out. A gift o' thanks. But would ye no gie us a loan o' your hob to heat our wee tin o' beans before we go?'

The farmer's wife laughed merrily. 'They making WAAF officers take to the roads like gypsies, are they, buying a boil of your tea can in exchange for a smoke? There's shepherd's pie and apple crumble left over from our own dinner, you can help yourselves to that! Just a minute while I find you a patch for your tube –'

They were soon tucking into a steaming hot meal considerably better than any they'd eaten at Maidsend for the past three months, including new cream to pour over the home baking. The only inconvenience was that they had to eat it standing up as there was so much traffic through the kitchen – the chairs had been removed so as not to clutter up the passage of farmhands and Land Army girls and dogs (no children; they'd been evacuated, away from the front line of the Battle of Britain).

'You owe me four more fears,' Queenie said.

Maddie thought. She thought about most of the fears that Queenie had confessed to – ghosts, dark, getting smacked for naughtiness, the college porter. They were almost childish fears, easily bottled. You could knock them on the head or laugh at them or ignore them.

'Dogs,' she said abruptly, remembering the slaving hounds on the way in. 'And Not Getting the Uniform Right – my hair's always too long, you're not allowed to alter the coat so it's always too big, things like that. And: Southerners laughing at my accent.'

'Och aye,' Queenie agreed. It could not be a problem she ever encountered, with her educated, upper-crust vowels, but being a Scot she sympathised with any distrust of the soft Southern English. 'You've only one more fear to go – make it good.'

Maddie dug deep. She came up honestly, hesitating a little at the simplicity and nakedness of the confession, then admitted: 'Letting people down.'

Her friend did not roll her eyes or laugh. She listened, nodding, stirring the warm cream into the baked apples. She didn't look at Maddie.

'Not doing my job properly,' Maddie expanded. 'Failing to live up to expectations.'

'A bit like my fear of killing someone,' Queenie said, 'but less specific.'

'It could include killing someone,' said Maddie.

'It could.' Queenie was sober now. 'Unless you were doing them a favour by killing them. Then you'd let them down if you *didn't*. If you couldn't make yourself. My great-uncle had horrible cancers in his throat and he'd been to America twice to have the tumours taken out and they kept coming back, and finally he asked his wife to kill him, and she did. She wasn't charged with anything – it was recorded as a shooting accident, believe it or not, but she was my grandmother's sister and we all know the truth.'

'How *horrible*,' Maddie said with feeling. 'How terrible for her! But – yes. You'd have to live with that selfishness, afterwards, if you couldn't make yourself do it. Yes, I'm dead afraid of that.'

The farmer's wife came in again then, with a patch and a bucket to fill with water so they could find the puncture, and Maddie quickly pulled down the blackout curtains over her bright and vulnerable soul and went off to sort out the tyre. Queenie stayed in the kitchen, thoughtfully lapping up the last drops of warm cream with a tin spoon.

Half an hour later, as they walked the bicycles back down the muddy farm lane and out to the road, Queenie commented, 'God help us if the invading Germans turn up with Scottish accents. I got her to draw me a map. I think I can find the pub now.'

'Here's your hairpin back,' Maddie said. She held out the thin sliver of steel. 'You'll want to get rid of the evidence next time you sabotage someone else's tyres.'

Queenie let out a peal of her giddy, infectious laughter. '*Caught!* I stuck it in too far and couldn't have got it back without you noticing. Don't be cross! It's a *game*.'

'You're too good,' Maddie said sharply.

'You got a hot meal out of it, didn't you? Come on, pub'll be open again by the time we get there, and we won't be able to stay long – I'm back on duty at eleven and I want a nap. But you deserve a whisky first. My treat.'

'I'm sure that's not what Nazi spies drink.'

'This one does.'

It was still raining as they coasted along the steep lane that wound down the cliffside to St Catherine's Bay. The road was slick and they went cautiously, standing on their brakes. There were a couple of miserable, wet soldiers manning the gun emplacements there, who waved and shouted as the girls on their bicycles came barrelling past, brakes screeching with the steepness of the descent. The Green Man was open. Sitting in its bow window were RAF Maidsend's gaunt and weary squadron leader and a myopic, well-turned-out civilian in a tweed suit. Everyone else was clustered round the bar.

Queenie walked purposefully to the cheerful coal fire and knelt, rubbing her hands together.

Squadron Leader Creighton rapped out a greeting that couldn't be ignored. 'What chance! Come and join us, ladies.' He stood up and gave a little ceremonious bow, offering chairs. Queenie, comfortable with and indeed accustomed to such attention from superior officers, stood up and let her coat be taken. Maddie hung back.

'This rather small and sodden young person,' said the squadron leader to the civilian, 'is the heroine I was telling you about – the German speaker. This other is Assistant Section Officer Brodatt, who took the call and guided the aircraft in. Join us, ladies, join us!'

'Assistant Section Officer Brodatt is a pilot,' Queenie said.

'A pilot!'

'Not at the moment,' said Maddie, blushing and writhing with embarrassment. 'I'd like to join the ATA, the Air Transport Auxiliary, when they let more women in. I have a civilian licence. My instructor joined in January this year.'

'How extraordinary!' said the short-sighted gentleman. He peered at Maddie through lenses half an inch thick. He was older than the squadron leader, old enough that he might've been refused if he'd tried to join up. Queenie shook hands with him and said gravely, 'You must be my contact.'

His eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. 'Must I?'

Maddie said furiously, 'Pay no attention to her, she's loopy. She's been playing daft games all morning –'

They all sat down.

'Her suggestion,' said Queenie. 'The daft games.'

'It *was* my suggestion, but only because she's so utterly *rubbish* at finding her way anywhere. I told her to pretend to be a –'

'"*Careless talk costs lives,*"' Queenie interrupted.

'– spy.' Maddie omitted any damning adjectives. 'She was supposed to have been dropped by parachute and had to find her way to this pub.'

'Not just any game,' exclaimed the gentleman in the tweed suit and thick spectacles. 'Not just *any* game, but the Great Game! Have you read *Kim*? Are you fond of Kipling?'

'I don't know, you naughty man, I've never kiplped,' Queenie responded tartly. The civilian let out a chortle of delight. Queenie said demurely, 'Of course Kipling, of course *Kim*, when I was little. I prefer Orwell now.'

'Been to university?'

They established that Queenie and the gentleman's wife had been at the same college, albeit nearly 20 years apart, and traded literary quotations in German. They were obviously cut from the same well-read, well-bred, lunatic cloth.

'What's your poison?' the civilian with a penchant for Kipling asked Queenie genially. 'The water of life? Do I detect a Scottish burr? Any other languages besides German?'

'Only coffee just now as I'm on duty later, aye you do, et oui, je suis courante en français aussi. My grandmother and my nanny are from Ormaie, near Poitiers. And I can do a fair parody of Aberdeen Doric and tinkers' cant, but the natives aren't fooled.'

'The Doric and tinkers' cant!' The poor fellow laughed so hard he had to take off his glasses and give them a wipe with a spotted silk handkerchief. He put them back on and peered at Queenie this time. The lenses made his blue-green irises seem so large they were startling. 'And – how *did* you manage to find your way here today, enemy agent mine?'

'It's Maddie's story,' said the enemy agent generously. 'And I owe her a whisky.'

So Maddie told, to an appreciative audience, how she had played Watson to her friend's giddy Sherlock Holmes – of the sabotaged tyre at the entrance to the well-stocked farm, and the assumptions about the dogs and the food and the flowers there. 'And,' Maddie finished with a triumphant flourish, 'the farm woman drew her a *map*.'

The so-called enemy agent glanced up at Maddie sharply. Squadron Leader Creighton held out his hand, palm up, a demand.

'I've burned it,' Queenie said in a low voice. 'I popped it in the fire when we first came in. I won't tell you which farm, so don't ask.'

'I shouldn't have to go to much trouble to deduce it myself,' said the short-sighted civilian, 'based on your friend's description.'

'I am an officer.' Her voice was still dead quiet. 'I gave the woman a royal ticking off after she'd done it, and I doubt she'll need another warning. But I never lied to her either, and she might have been more suspicious in the first place if I had. It would be inappropriate to punish anyone – apart from me of course.'

'I wouldn't dream of it. I am agog at your initiative.'

The man glanced at the silent Creighton. 'I do believe your earlier suggestion is spot on,' he said, and rather randomly quoted what Maddie reckoned was probably a line from Kipling.

*'Only once in a thousand years is a horse born so well fitted for the game as this our colt.'*

'Bear in mind,' said Creighton soberly, holding the other man's magnified eyes with his own over the top of his steepled fingers, 'these two work well together.'

clk/sd & w/op

Bloody Machiavellian English Intelligence Officer playing God.

I never knew his name. Creighton introduced him by an alias the man sometimes uses. At my interview he jokingly identified himself by a number because that's what the British Empire spies do in *Kim* (though *we* don't; we are told in training that numbers are too dangerous).

I liked him – don't get me wrong – beautiful eyes behind the dreadful specs, and very lithe and powerful beneath the scholarly tweed. It was *wonderful* flirting with him, all that razor-edge literary banter, like Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. A battle of wit, and a test too. But he *was* playing God. I noticed, I knew it and I didn't care. It was such a thrill to be one of the archangels, the avengers, the chosen few.

Von Linden is about the same age as the intelligence officer who recruited me. Has von Linden an educated wife too? (He wears a ring.) Might von Linden's wife have been at university with my German tutor?

The sheer stark raving incredible madness of such a very ordinary possibility makes me want to put my head down on this cold table and sob.

Everything is *all so wrong*.

I have no more paper.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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